

AGENDA ITEM 4**RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL****CORPORATE PARENTING BOARD****7TH DECEMBER 2015****INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER (IRO) REPORT****REPORT OF THE GROUP DIRECTOR, COMMUNITY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES**

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1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

To provide the Lead Member for children and young people and the Corporate Parenting Board, with information about the activity of the IRO Service.

2. RECOMMENDATION

To note the contents of the attached report

3. BACKGROUND

The Adoption and Children Act 2002 requires the Local Authority to appoint IROs to conduct reviews for looked after children and monitor the Local Authority's performance in relation to implementing the care plans for individual children. Specific guidance is entitled "Independent Reviewing Officer Guidance Wales 2004.

IROs convene and chair reviews for all children looked after by the Council, be they subject to care orders, accommodated voluntarily, placed with foster carers, in residential or secure establishments, living with kinship carers or placed for adoption.

IROs have specific responsibility to raise concerns about looked after children, which cannot be resolved, to Chief Executive level within the Local Authority and subsequently to CAFCASS to consider legal action.

4. CURRENT SITUATION

Current guidance requires the IRO service to be managed by an officer who does not have direct or line management responsibility, for individual children's cases or service provision. Therefore within RCT the service is managed by the Head of Safeguarding and Standards who has no Line Management responsibility for case work or care planning decisions affecting Looked after Children and who provides this report directly for the Group Director.

Attached at Appendix 1 is the monitoring report for the period 1st April 2015 to 30th September 2015.

5. **KEY THEMES**

The key themes highlighted within the report include:

- Maintained good performance in relation to reviews being held within timescale.
- Progress of the LAC website in consultation with children and young people.
- Use of the resolution process, alongside caseload size and the IRO quality assurance role.
- Implications of the Social Service and Well-being Act 2014

MONITORING REPORT TO THE GROUP DIRECTOR COMMUNITY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES

December 2015

Adoption and Children Act 2002 and The Review of Children's Cases (Amendment) (Wales) Regulations 2004

Purpose of Report

To provide the lead Director for Children and Young People with information about the discharge of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) functions for the period to 1st April to 30th September 2015.

Background

The provisions of the Adoption and Children Act 2002, S118 require local Authorities to appoint IROs, "to participate in the review of children's cases, monitor the authority's function in respect of the review and refer the case to Child and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS) if the failure to implement aspects of a care plan might be considered in breach of the child's human rights".

"Independent Reviewing Officers Guidance Wales 2004" sets out the requirements of the IROs and responsible authority in more detail. Key outcomes envisaged are:

- Focus on needs of children and ensuring they are addressed
- Minimising drift
- Consistency of care planning and decision making
- Involvement of appropriate persons in the process

The Guidance clearly requires an IRO to chair reviews of children who are: -

- In an Adoptive Placement prior to an adoption order being granted;
- Looked after subject to a statutory order or accommodated with the agreement of parents (including a series of short term breaks)
- Young people in Young Offender Institutions subject to a care order or on remand
- It is good practice to review those to be looked after s20 on release from custody and also Pathway plans for young people up to age 18 years.

This more recent guidance strengthens the existing requirements of the Review of Children's Cases Regulations 1991 and its accompanying Guidance made under the Children Act 1989.

Frequency of reports

Reports are provided twice a year and are also presented to the Corporate Parenting Board.

The Reviewing Service

The reviewing service currently sits within the remit of the Head of Safeguarding and Standards in Children's Services thus fulfilling the regulation (2A (3) which states that "where the IRO is an employee of the responsible authority the IRO's post within that authority must not be under the direct management of:

- a) A person involved in the management of the case;
- b) A person with management responsibilities in relation to a person mentioned in paragraph (a); or
- c) A person with control over the resources allocated to the case"

The service now comprises 7.6 fte IRO posts plus a Team Manager. The team works on the basis that each IRO (fte) is responsible for the reviews of an average 80 looked after children; a rudimentary caseload weighting system has been developed. The team is now located at Ty Catrin in Pontypridd, where facilities for reviews are much improved although the majority are still conducted within the community usually in the child or young person's placement setting.

Purpose of Reviews

Each child looked after should have an effective care plan which identifies outcomes for the child, sets objectives for work with the child, birth family and caregivers in relation to the child's developmental needs, which are: health, education, emotional and behavioural development, identity, family and social relationships, social presentation, self care skills.

The review meeting is a key component of the assessment, planning, intervention and review process of work with families. Its purpose is to consider the plan for the child, monitor progress and enable decisions to be made to amend that plan in the light of knowledge and circumstances.

The IRO has particular responsibilities set out in guidance, to monitor progress of the responsible LA in implementing the care plan, reconvening the review meeting in certain circumstances, raise concerns within the LA up to Chief Executive level and refer to CAFCASS unresolved concerns as appropriate.

Frequency of Reviews

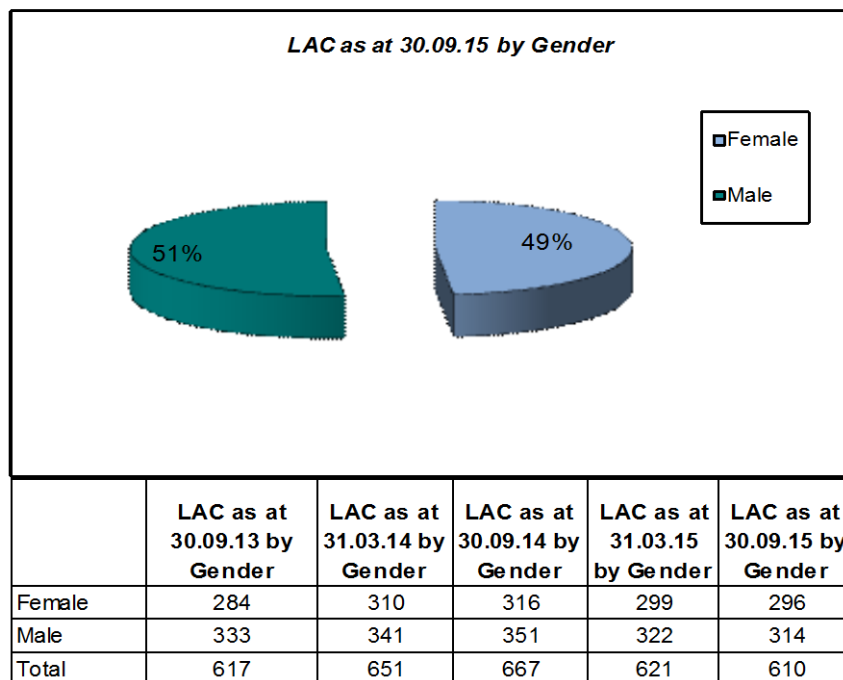
Looked after children reviews must be conducted at the following frequency: -

- Within 28 days of a child becoming looked after,
- Subsequently within 3 months,

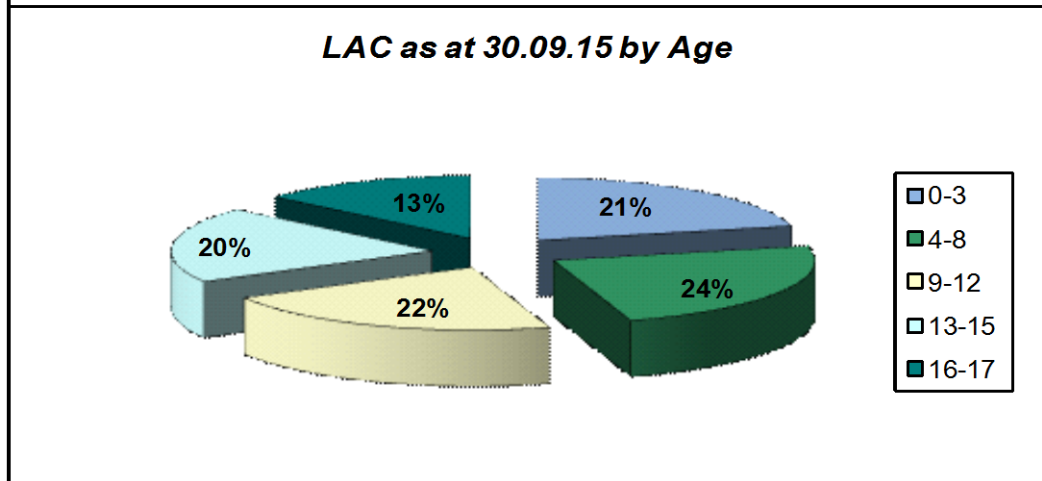
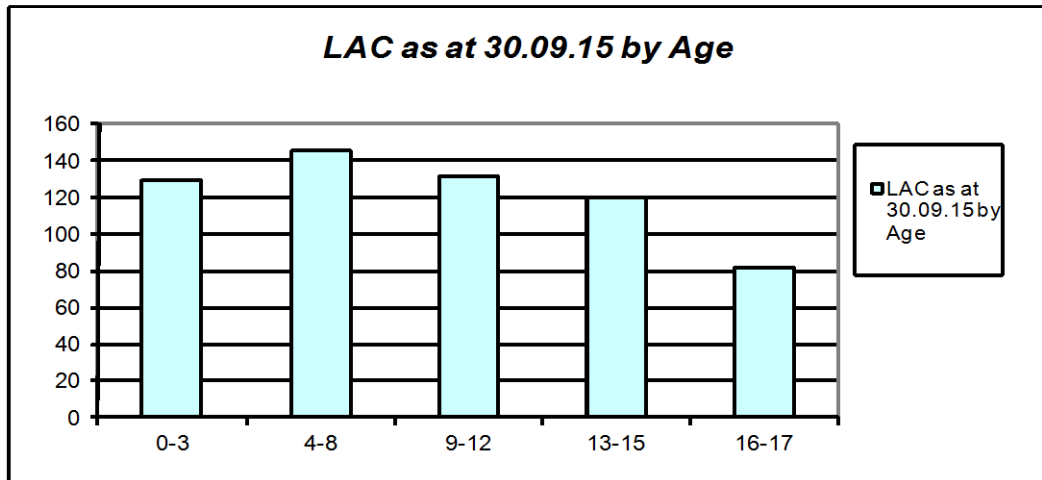
- 6 monthly thereafter,
- Reviews should be convened earlier if there is a significant change in the child’s care plan or failure to carry out an important aspect of that plan,
- The cycle begins again from the date the child is placed with an adoptive family;
- Children receiving a series of short breaks should be reviewed within 3 months of the start of the first period and thereafter 6 monthly.
- Reviews of family plans produced by the Integrated Family Support Team are held three times per year. The initial review is held 28 days after the start of the intensive phase, the second review 3 months later and the final review after 6 months.

Looked After Population (30th September 2015)

1. Looked After Population by Gender

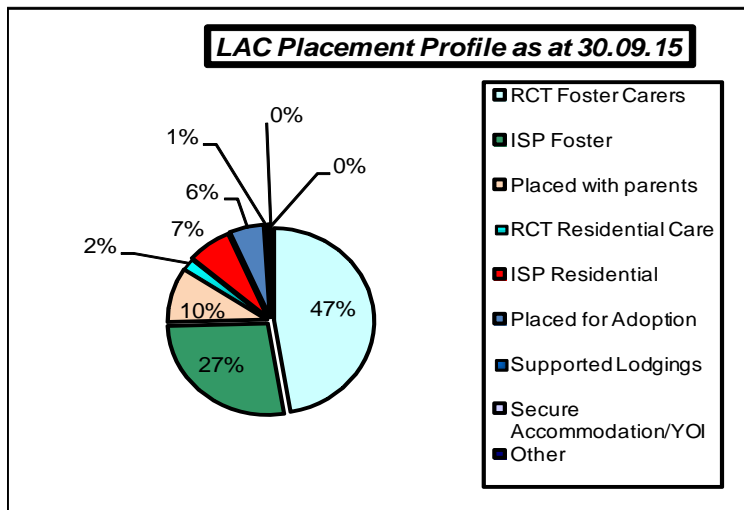


2. Looked After Population by Age Group

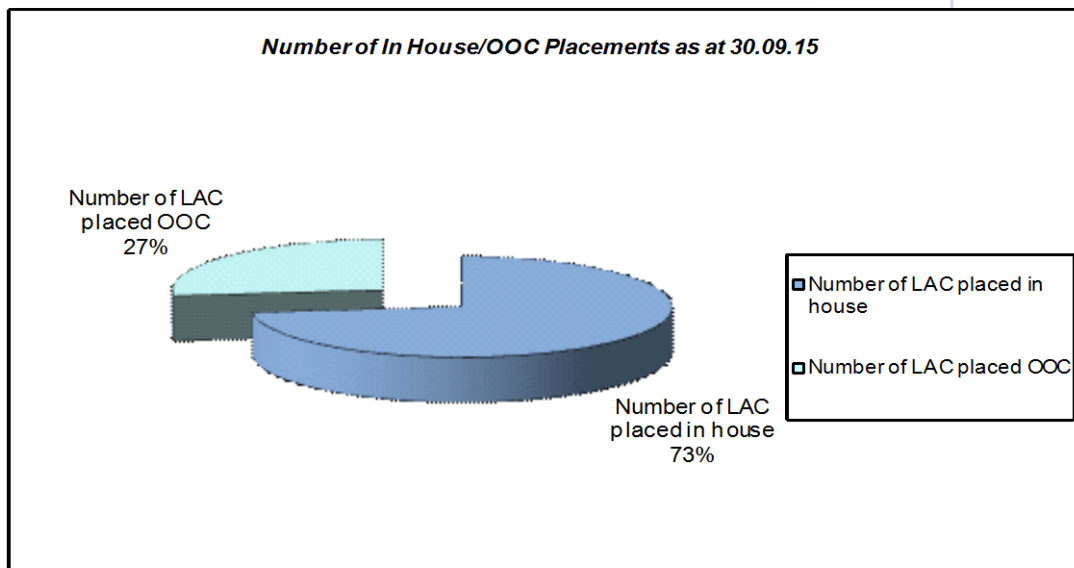


	0-3	4-8	9-12	13-15	16-17	Total
LAC as at 30.09.13 by Age	146	154	118	109	90	617
LAC as at 31.03.14 by Age	161	159	130	112	89	651
LAC as at 30.09.14 by Age	159	163	137	118	90	667
LAC as at 31.03.15 by Age	134	160	136	110	81	621
LAC as at 30.09.15 by Age	130	146	132	120	82	610

3. Placement Details – including numbers in foster care, residential placements, placements within and external to RCT, those provided by Independent agencies etc.



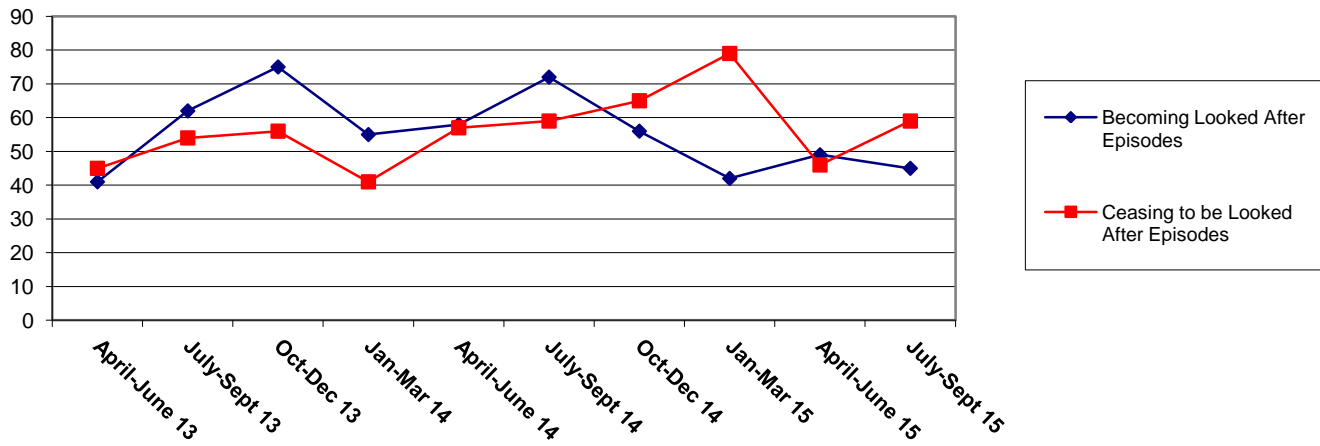
	Sep-13	Mar-14	Sep-14	Mar-15	Sep-15
RCT Foster Carers	290	304	324	295	289
ISP Foster	206	210	199	174	166
Placed with parents	46	52	56	55	59
RCT Residential Care	13	10	13	8	12
ISP Residential	39	40	45	48	44
Placed for Adoption	21	27	26	38	34
Supported Lodgings	2	5	3	2	4
Secure Accommodation/YOI	0	0	1	1	2
Other	0	3	0	0	0
Total	617	651	667	621	610



	Sep-13	Mar-14	Sep-14	Mar-15	Sep-15
Number of LAC placed in house	434	476	485	449	446
Number of LAC placed OOC	183	175	182	172	164
Total LAC	617	651	667	621	610
% OOC	29.7%	26.9%	27.3%	27.7%	26.9%

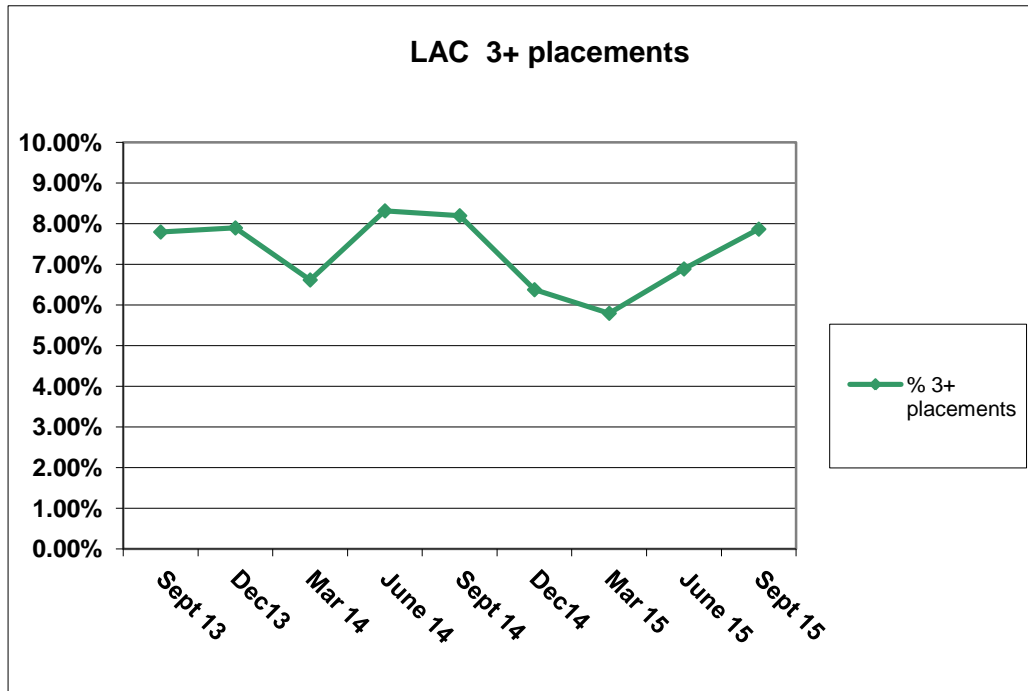
4. Admissions and Discharge Information

The number of Becoming Looked After & Ceasing to be Looked After Episodes



	April-June 13	July-Sept 13	Oct-Dec 13	Jan-Mar 14	April-June 14	July-Sept 14	Oct-Dec 14	Jan-Mar 15	April-June 15	July-Sept 15
Becoming Looked After Episodes	41	62	75	55	58	72	56	42	49	45
Ceasing to be Looked After Episodes	45	54	56	41	57	59	65	79	46	59

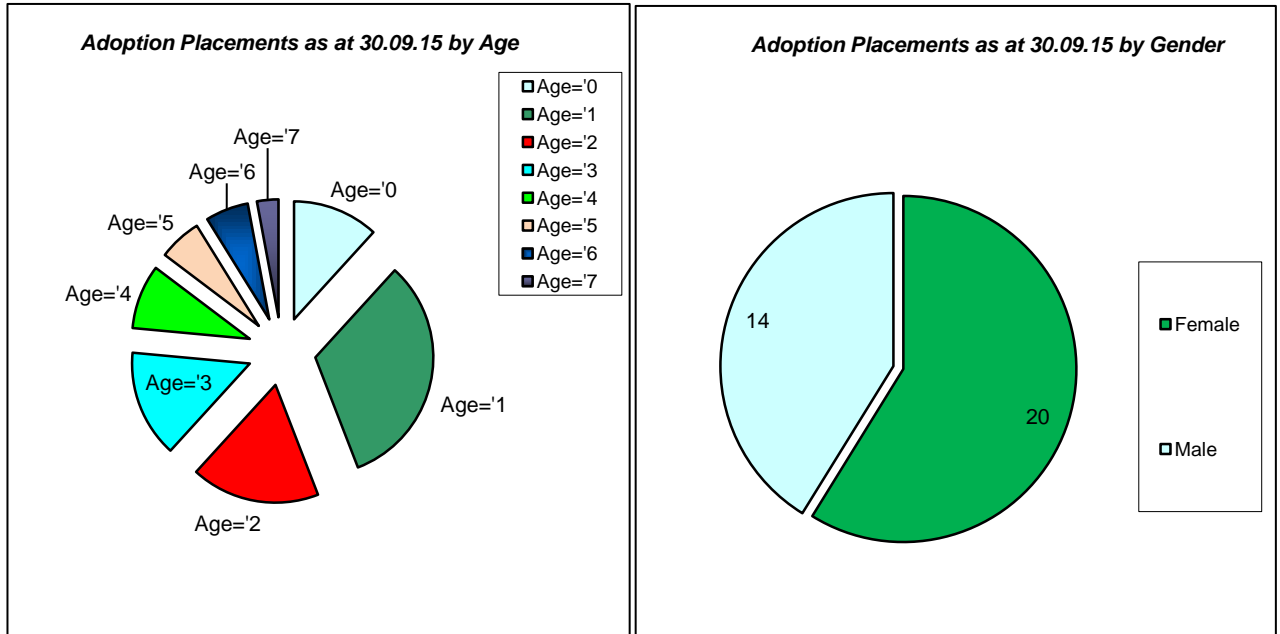
5. Placement Stability



	Sept 13	Dec13	Mar 14	June 14	Sept 14	Dec14	Mar 15	June 15	Sept 15
% 3+ placements	7.80%	7.90%	6.62%	8.32%	8.20%	6.38%	5.80%	6.89%	7.87%

6. Adoption Information

Total numbers of children placed for adoption or adopted, including age and gender breakdown



Adoption Placements as at 30.09.15 by Age	Total
Age=0	4
Age=1	11
Age=2	6
Age=3	5
Age=4	3
Age=5	2
Age=6	2
Age=7	1
Age=8	0
Total	34

Adoption Placements as at 30.09.15 by Gender	Total
Female	20
Male	14
Total	34

Adoption Information	Total
Number of children placed for adoption as at 30.09.15	34
Number of children placed for adoption between 01.10.14-30.09.15	46
Number of Children adopted between 01.10.14-30.09.15	36

Review Activity 1st April to 30th September 2015.

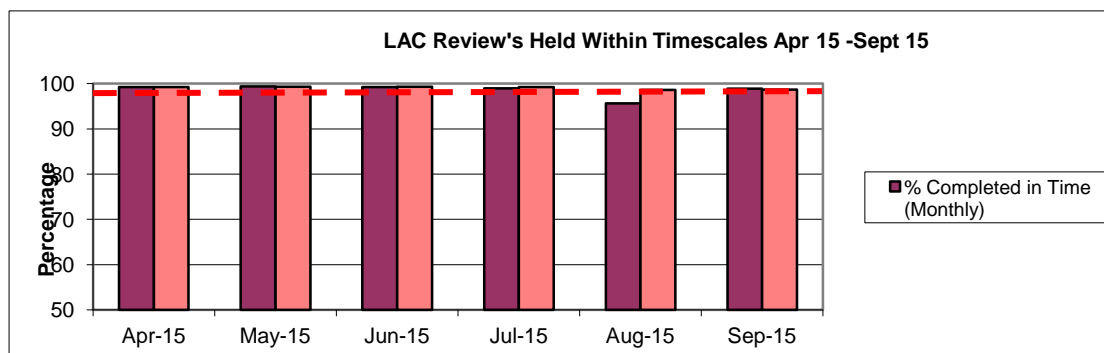
There has been overall positive performance during the last 5 years in respect of reviews being held within timescale, performance for the period reported on has improved very slightly.

842 reviews were due in this 6 month period, which is a reduction since the last reporting period reflecting the decrease in LAC numbers and also the different arrangements for reviewing short term breaks for disabled children. This will actually be in compliance with the SSWB Act due to be implemented in April 2016. 11 of the reviews were held outside of the required timescale, overall performance is just over 98% compliance. This continues yet again to be excellent performance given the logistics of co-ordinating such a large volume of meetings with a considerable and varied range of participants.

This is a considerable achievement by the whole Reviewing Team given that the team have experienced some vacancies during the reporting period and the team manager has changed to an interim arrangement.

The excellent business support arrangements and systems which contribute to the work of the reviewing team continue to be absolutely essential in enabling the team to perform at this current level. The practice of setting review dates with flexibility to reschedule within timescale if problems occur; remains firmly established, along with the commitment of both IROs and business support staff to performance improvement.

Month	Reviews Due	Number held within Timescale	Reviews outside of Timescale	Compliance
April	134	133	1	99.25%
May	172	171	1	99.42%
June	138	137	1	99.28%
July	98	97	1	98.98%
August	114	109	5	95.61%
September	186	184	2	98.92%
Total	842	831	11	98.69%



Month	Reviews held out of timescale	Reason
April	1	Cancelled and rearranged due placement breakdown
May	1	Cancelled and rearranged initially due to family holiday and then child had medical appointment
June	1	Cancelled and rearranged due to IRO unavailability
July	1	Cancelled and rearranged due to young person moving placement
August	4 reviews for individual children	3 cancelled and rearranged due to unavailability of family, IRO or SW , 1 as child placed for adoption
September	2 reviews for individual children	1 cancelled and rearranged due to family bereavement and another due to unavailability of SW

Comparators (last year)

April 2014 to September 2014

949 reviews held within timescale 29 outside Total 978= 97.03%

October 2014 to March 2015

884 reviews held within timescale 18 outside Total 902= 98%

IRO Resolution of Problems

As outlined earlier the IRO has responsibility to monitor the LA performance in relation to individual children and to raise areas of good practice as well as problems and issues. IROs forward compliments and positive comments to staff and managers to ensure good practice is recognised.

The current guidance includes a face to face problem resolution meeting which is co-ordinated by the Reviewing team. If problems or issues are not resolved there continue to be arrangements in place to escalate them through the management structure to the Service Director, to the Group Director and to the Chief Executive as required by guidance if necessary.

The aim of the guidance is to:-

- Keep children and young people as its focus
- Streamline the process and make it more consistent, understandable and straightforward for all
- Improve communication between IROs, social workers and their managers and thereby achieve prompt resolution of issues raised
- Ensure records of the process are included on the child or young person's file
- Ensure IROs fulfil their responsibilities as set out statutory guidance.

The new Team Manager and Service Manager plan to review the process in early 2016 to ensure it remains fit for purpose.

Issues raised by IROs April to September 2015

There were 30 issues for resolution raised using the IRO resolution process during this period. This is one more than was raised in the previous 6 months.

This reporting period has demonstrated improved care planning for looked after children and it is noticeable that there are no issues relating to revocation of placement orders which was a theme of the last report.

The issues raised this period are varied and include the following themes plus individual case examples:

Themes

Placement with Parents Regulations.

Before a child subject to a care order can return to the care of a parent, assessments under Placement with Parents regulations must be completed to ensure that the parent/s and household members can meet the child's needs and provide them with a safe and stable placement. The decision to change a care plan to rehabilitation is agreed in the child's review meeting and the subsequent review meeting should make a recommendation (based on reports and assessments) to the Head of Service.

Resolution: There have been instances when procedures haven't been adhered to, sometimes because the courts haven't afforded Children's Services the time to do so, and sometimes, it would appear because there is a belief that to do so will delay the reunification process. The IROs continue to be flexible and offer to bring review meetings forward once the social worker has collated all of the necessary reports.

- **Legality of Placement.**

An increasing number of children are being placed with extended family and family friends who have been put forward by family. Initially a viability assessment must be completed within a fortnight which will assess whether the placement is likely to meet the child's identified physical and emotional needs. It will include a property inspection, statutory checks including DBS and references. A placement is deemed illegal if the carers are not undergoing an assessment or have failed a viability assessment.

Resolution: The IROs have liaised with the relevant team managers and service managers to confirm that the arrangements for the preparation of assessments for court and consequent reports are in place. When assessments haven't been undertaken the IROs have brought the matter to the attention of team managers and service managers and court orders have been sought retrospectively.

Placement Moves:

It is accepted that on the whole children are best placed within their own communities but sometimes circumstances dictate that it might be in their best interests to place them out of county; whether it be for their own protection or because there isn't an appropriate resource within RCT to meet their specific needs. It is envisaged that most, if not all, of the children placed out of county will at an appropriate point return to RCT. IROs have a valid contribution to make to this process and can provide challenge as required, as the IRO may for example have information from the most recent review meeting, that will assist Children's Services to make an informed decision

Resolution: The IROs have raised resolutions when required and resolution meetings have been convened as a result which have considered the immediate and longer term implications of young people remaining in placement or returning to RCT before a decision is made .

Delay in Discharging Care Orders:

When children who are subject to Care Orders have returned to live with their parents under Placement with Parent Regulations, their rehabilitation is considered to be successful if the family can evidence that they can meet all of the child's needs. The decision to discharge the Care Order will be made in a review meeting once Children's Services are satisfied that the children have been reunified successfully (usually after 12 months). Children continue to be looked after until the Care Order has been discharged.

Resolution: The delays in such situations are monitored in the LAC Quality Assurance Panel.

Drift and Delay

The review meeting will seek to ensure that outstanding tasks are timetabled and that the timescales are realistic and achievable to avoid drift and delay in children and young people's care plans

Resolution: Where there is unnecessary or unacceptable drift and/or delay the IRO will liaise with the social worker and team manager to discuss the outstanding issue and where possible agree timescales to address them promptly.

Individual Cases

1. Placement with Parents Regulations.

The IRO raised a resolution in respect of a 16 year old young person who was having weekend overnight stays with his mother without Placement with Parents Regulations having been completed.

Resolution: The matter was prioritised by the social worker and assessments completed as a matter of urgency to enable the contacts to continue. In the meantime the matter was brought to the attention of the Head of Service because the contact itself was a positive one and was seen to contribute to the stability of the current placement.

2. Legality of placement.

The IRO raised concerns regarding three children who were placed with relatives on an interim care order but without the necessary viability assessments of the carers having been completed thereby bringing into question the legality of the placement.

Resolution : In addition to the resolution itself, the IRO and reviewing team manager entered into discussions with both legal services and the newly formed kinship team, which resulted in Children's Services returning to court to for an additional order.

3. Placement Moves

The IRO raised the issue of a vulnerable teenage girl who had settled in an out of county placement that she had been told was her long term placement but was recently informed that there were plans to return her to a placement within RCT. The girl had reportedly settled in school and CAMHS had assessed her as need for stability and security as paramount.

Resolution: Following discussions the decision was made not to disrupt the placement.

4. Service Issues

During his review meeting a 17 year old boy spoke of his frustration that his social worker was on long term sick leave at a time when he was looking to move into independent living. Both he and the staff in his residential unit

needed advice and assistance as they sought an appropriate tenancy and support for him.

Resolution: The aftercare team manager reallocated the case to another member of her team with whom the boy had spoken in the past.

5. Drift and Delay.

Discussions in the LAC Review for a 17year old boy known to the Disabled Children's Team were unable to determine and/or confirm post-18 plans as clarity needed to be achieved with his t foster carers as to whether they were able to provide the young person with an adult placement and if so what support would be necessary to sustain this.

Resolution: A clear plan was agreed in the resolution meeting that having clarified respite entitlement, allowed time for the carers to make an informed decision but still provided adult services the necessary time to identify a supported placement in the community should it be required. The carers have since agreed to offer the young man a placement for a further 12 months to help prepare him for supported accommodation.

6. Delay in Discharging Care Order.

It was brought to the IRO's attention that the decision from the previous review to begin the process for discharging a child's Care Order within three months had not been actioned nearly 6 months later. Due to the delay the parents made their own application for legal aid which was refused because they were told Children's Services should make the application.

Resolution: The matter was taken to the Looked After Children Quality Assurance Panel by the Head of Service where timescales to take this forward were agreed and have now been actioned.

Current issues for the Reviewing Service

Capacity

There are 7.6 full time equivalent IRO posts case loads are approximately 93 LAC per full time IRO. The average caseload figure has increased since the last reporting period. If IFST meetings are included that figure raises to just over 100. The reviewing team has undergone a difficult 6 months which has included vacancies within the team and the promotional move on of the previous Team Manager. There continues to be 1 post vacant and an interim Team Manager arrangement in place. This will hopefully be resolved within the next few months given the remodelling of Children Services

To their credit the team have worked together to ensure reviews for all children and young people take place in a timely manner covering the reviews that have no allocated IRO due to vacancies. The 98% compliance rate is a

testament to the success of their approach. Unfortunately another consequence of this lack of service capacity is that many of the review decisions have not been distributed within 14 days target.

The number of children each IRO is responsible for does without doubt have an affect upon the capacity of individual IROs to fulfil their quality assurance role and follow up issues of concern.

The council however continues to be compliant with statutory guidance, in relation to those children and young people entitled to an IRO.

The Manager has been looking at different means of maximising the effectiveness of the IRO resources within the team. An example of this has been the use of conference calls, some have taken place within this reporting period . This is not without its difficulties as looked after children and young people can be particularly vulnerable and as a Corporate Parent the Council need to ensure it discharges its obligations safely and effectively which includes visits to the individual in placement.

Development work

Pathway Plans

IROs are responsible for convening and chairing pathway plan reviews for all young people looked after and the young people from age 16 to 17 years who had previously been looked after.

The developments and legal guidance from Welsh Government which provides more choice for young people about when they have to leave the foster care system are now in place. RCT successful piloted the “When I’m Ready” scheme which allows for young people to remain in foster care post 18. It has been agreed that in RCT the IRO will review the When I’m Ready arrangements as part of the first pathway plan review ting post 18 under this new arrangement.

Short term breaks

The IROs took on responsibility for reviewing children with disabilities who receive a series of short term breaks formally from September 2011, as the reviews arose.

Continuing on with the work undertaken last year led by the DCT Service Manager, short breaks are now allocated as a Child in Need (CIN) or LAC service. IROs chair the reviews for those children who are looked after. As a result the reviewing team continues to focus on a reviewing smaller number of children with complex additional needs.

Social Services and Well-being Act 2014

The above Act which is due to be implemented in April 2016 has considerable implications for Childrens Services and consequently the IROs in fulfilling their role of monitoring the LA performance in relation to individual children and young people looked after. The Act sets out a strengthened role for IROs in this regards and has amended the previous IRO regulations. There will be key changes for example care and support plans which integrate the PEP and Health plan and the requirements for IROs to meet with children and young pole which is currently good practice is made explicit in the new Act.

The LAC codes of practice have been issued this month consequently the service priority will now be to prepare for implementation in April.

Consultation Documents.

The reviewing team is committed to ensuring that the child or young person is the focus of their own review meeting and that they feel able to contribute their own wishes and feelings as part of the review process.

The graduate officer has completed her 6 month project and the consultation documents that she and the consultation group (comprising of a small number of looked after children) designed are already in circulation. The feedback from looked after children using the new documents for the first time has been very positive.

The team manager has plans to meet with groups of foster carers and kinship carers to explore what if any changes they might like to see made to the content of the carers consultation documents.

2 Sides Website

The graduate officer was also responsible for designing and collating the information for the 2 Sides website which is currently under construction and which is expected to go live on the 30th November. IT is currently working on the visuals before the content can be uploaded both in Welsh and English.

The website is primarily targeted towards looked after children and young people of secondary school age and it is hoped will be somewhere that they can access far more information about what it means to be looked after regardless of where they are placed.

The plan is for there to be a link for an online consultation document on the website so that looked after children and young people can choose to complete it in their own time on their phone or tablet should they wish. This facility may not be accessible when the website first goes live but should be shortly afterwards.

Open offer of Advocacy

The team manager has been in discussion with representatives of NYAS (advocacy service) about the best way to ensure that looked after children and young people are made an active offer of advocacy as recommended by the Children's Commissioner. The reviewing officers have prepared a letter for this purpose and consideration is being given as to the most effective way of distributing the letter. Information about Advocacy will also be on the 2 sides website.

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December 2015