

# Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report 2016 - 2017



**Sandwell**  
Metropolitan Borough Council



**Report Author: Carol Singleton**

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## **1. Introduction and Purpose of the Annual Report**

- 1.1. In line with the statutory requirement for the IRO Manager to produce a report for the scrutiny of the Corporate Parenting Board, as detailed in the IRO Handbook (2010). This report provides an overview on the quality and provision of the Service provided to Sandwell children by the Council's Independent Reviewing Officer and Child Protection Chairs Service.
- 1.2. Following presentation to the Sandwell MBC Corporate Parenting Board and the Sandwell Safeguarding Childrens Board, this report, and a Children and Young People's version, will be a publicly accessible document.

## **2. Reporting Period**

- 2.1. This report covers the work of the unit for the period from 1st April 2016 to 31st March 2017. It outlines recent developments and concludes with detailing the proposed future developments of the Unit.

## **3. The Legal, Statutory and National Context of the IRO Role**

- 3.1. The appointment of an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) for a looked after child or young person in the care of the Local Authority is a legal requirement under s.118 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002.
- 3.2. In March 2010, the *IRO Handbook* was issued, providing Local Authorities with statutory guidance on how the IRO's should discharge their duties. The Handbook (para. 2.14) states that the IRO has several specific responsibilities. These include;
  - promoting the voice of the child;
  - ensuring that plans for looked after children are based on a detailed and informed assessment, are up to date, effective and provide a real and genuine response to each child's needs;
  - making sure that the child understands how an advocate could help and his/her entitlement to one;
  - offering a safeguard to prevent any 'drift' in care planning for looked after children and the delivery of services to them; and
  - and monitoring the activity of the local authority as a corporate parent in ensuring that care plans have given proper consideration and weight to the child's wishes and feelings and that, where appropriate, the child fully understands
- 3.3. The regulations require that the Local Authority appoint an IRO to all children who become looked after. An IRO must also be a qualified Social Worker.

- 3.4. The IRO role includes assuring themselves that children's plans are progressing and a difference is being made to their lives. This involves challenging Social Workers, Team Managers (TMs), Senior Managers and partner agencies about the progress on children's cases. For IROs to maintain their independence, the Local Authority is required to set up clear mechanisms for the IROs to challenge appropriately including independent legal advice. Independent legal advice is available to IROs in Sandwell MBC via a partnership arrangement with Wolverhampton City Council.

## **4. The Sandwell IRO Service**

- 4.1. Responsibility for the IRO service in Sandwell comes under the Service Director for Children and Families. The IRO Unit are located at the Metsec building where there is office space and conferencing facilities. Over the course of the next year (2017/18) there is a refurbishment of the building planned, as the service moves into a Trust, with an emphasis on upgrading the conferencing facilities with an emphasis on making it 'family friendly'.
- 4.2. All IROs have a mix of Child Protection (CP), Looked After Children (LAC) and Foster Carer Reviews (FCR) which allows them to develop their skills and knowledge in more than one area. This gives the service a flexibility, increasing its capacity to respond to any fluctuations in demand with respect to CP conference dates. Progress has also been made this year in relation to the timeliness of Foster Carer Reviews.
- 4.3. The IRO Unit has a permanent and stable management team in place. During 2016/17 there was recruitment to the management team and permanent managers appointed. The Group Head for Safeguarding started in the service in May 2016. The second IRO Team Manager post was recruited to and this manager started in June 2016. A new Business Support Manager was appointed and started in June 2016. The IRO Team Managers are members of the West Midlands Regional IRO Group and attend regularly. The Group meet on a bi-monthly basis to share information, report on common and emerging themes and priorities and provide peer support and sector-led improvement opportunities.
- 4.4. The drive to recruit IROs into post has been a primary objective for this year. The full establishment of IROs for the beginning of the year was 13.2 IROs. At the start of the reporting year there were 11.2 IROs in post. Recruitment to 2 temporary posts was undertaken, and the new IROs started in September 2016. Following a recognition by the senior leadership team that IRO caseloads were too high (average 90 cases) there was an increase to the IRO establishment of 2 IROs from 13.2 IROs to 15.2 IROs. A further 2 IROs started in January 2017. At the end of the reporting period all 15.2 posts had an IRO in them. There was 1 IRO post to recruit to but this was covered by an agency IRO. This meant that caseloads had reduced to 76, almost in line with the recommended 50-70 cases in the IRO Handbook. New IROs starting in the Unit has revitalised the Unit. Whilst some children have had to have

changes of their IRO as part of this recruitment process all efforts have been made to minimise the impact of these changes.

- 4.5. All IROs in the Unit access training opportunities. There has been a focus this year of introducing Signs of Safety to Looked After Children Reviews and Child Protection Conferences (July 2016) with all IROs given the opportunity to attend the 5 day Signs of Safety course. The IROs attend the monthly Children and Families' Managers Workshops ensuring that the voice of the IRO is present in the workshops as well as encouraging relationship building with colleagues from the frontline service.
- 4.6. The monthly IRO service meetings have a workshop focus on improving practice and standards of the IRO role in Sandwell. A focus of these service meetings has been on embedding Signs of Safety. This has been particularly in relation to family friendly meetings and outcome focussed plans, together with increasing and recognising the need for IROs to raise issues with the service including DRPs (Dispute Resolution Process) when the service needs to be challenged. The meeting has also been used for setting out IRO standards for Looked After Children Reviews and Child Protection Conferences, increasing the IRO Footprint with IRO visits to children, preparation meetings with Social Workers and IRO mid-point audits.
- 4.7. During the reporting period and the appointment of the new Business Support Manager for the Unit, there has been a focus on building a cohesive, consistent and co-dependent relationship between the Business Support Service and the IRO Unit. The Business Support Manager being part of the same management team has helped with this cohesion. Towards the end of the reporting year this relationship has improved, is working well, and there is a synergy in the Unit.
- 4.8. The Sandwell Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) Business Manager has become part of the Management Team and this has brought the Sandwell Safeguarding Children Board (SSCB) closer to the IRO Unit. The IRO Team Managers are involved in the SSCB strategic groups with one IRO manager representing the service on the Child Death Overview Panel (CDOP) and one responsible for ensuring there is a link between any critical incidences and Significant Incident Notifications Forms (SINFs) to the SSCB and Ofsted notifications. The Group Head for Safeguarding chairs the Quality of Practice and Performance Sub-Group for the SSCB, and represents the service on the Serious Case Review Sub-group as well as the Safer Sandwell Partnership Domestic Homicide Review Panels. There is still work to do to ensure that the learning from these groups is not just systematically disseminated through the service, but that the learning is applied to practice.
- 4.9. Towards the end of the reporting period an initial meeting with CAFCASS has been held between the IROs and the Service manager for CAFCASS. The joint working protocol was

reviewed and named links for escalating concerns to were agreed. A review of communication and notification by CAFCASS of the named Guardian to the IROs was confirmed. It was agreed that there would be twice yearly meetings between CAFCASS and the IRO Unit in October and March of each year.

## 5. IRO Caseloads and Unit Performance

### 5.1. Caseloads

5.2. In common with the most of its regional peers, Sandwell IRO's have a dual function. As well as the independent review of looked after children, the IRO's provide independent chairing of Child Protection Conferences, a separate statutory function under Working Together 2015 for which they are accountable to the Director of Children's Services. The most significant benefit of integrating LAC Reviews with the chairing of Child Protection Conferences is the opportunity to provide a greater level of consistency and oversight for children and young people. The benefit of continued and sustained relationships, and the potential for relationships to improve outcomes for children, irrespective of a child's status, is a key and important strength. The argument in favour of separating the functions is the ability to prioritise looked after children and young people's cases. It is acknowledged that the integrated model in use in Sandwell does place an additional task upon the IRO Unit to ensure that there is always Initial Child protection Conference (ICPC) availability to ensure that the meetings are held within the timescales set out in the Working Together 2015 guidance.

**Note: due to the change from ICS to LCS system in January 2017 some of the tables below represents 10 month's data.**

**Table 1. Total Unit Caseload and IRO Average Caseload at Year End**

IRO Caseloads and Averages	2016/17				2017/18		Averages		
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	07/09/2017	2016-17	2015/16	2014/15
LAC	555	593	589	608	597	640	586	534	544
CP	387	393	407	417	534	657	401	317	322
Foster Carers (0.5 of a case)	89	88	86	84	72	79	87	177	191
<b>Total</b>	<b>1031</b>	<b>1074</b>	<b>1082</b>	<b>1109</b>	<b>1203</b>	<b>1376</b>	<b>1074</b>	<b>851</b>	<b>866</b>
Number of IRO's in post	11.2	11.2	13.2	14.8	15.2	15.2	14.8	11.6	11
Average	92	96	82	75	79	91	73	73	78
On average, each IRO carries approximately 10 CIN cases									

5.3. Table 1 shows caseloads by quarter for the reporting period and the historical comparisons. The data confirms a decrease in the 2016/17 return and total caseloads.

5.4. In May 2016, 2 vacant IRO posts left a staff group of 11.2 with caseloads of 92, significantly above IRO Handbook recommendation of 50-70. Successful recruitment to full capacity (13.2

IROs) by Q3 reduced IRO caseloads and the creation of a further 2 IRO posts (15.2 IROs) was agreed to bring caseloads down to the recommended level. Q4 evidences the successful recruitment and reduction of IRO caseloads to a reasonable level with all 15.2 IROs in post and an average caseload of 75.

## 5.5. Number of Reviews

**Table 2: LAC Reviews and Child Protection Conferences undertaken**

Total Unit Activity			
	Historical		
	2016 -2017	2015-2016	2014-2015
LAC	1449	1225	1163
CP	916	740	730

5.6. Table 2 evidences that within the reporting period the Unit have chaired a total of 1449 LAC Reviews (compared with 1225 in 2015/16 and 1163 in 2014/15) and a total of 916 Child Protection Conferences (compared with 740 in 2015/16 and 730 in 2014/15). This is a sharp increase of 400 children during 15/16 compared to an increase of 72 the previous year (14/15). This overall sharp increase in the numbers of Looked After Children and children subject to CP Plans has impacted on the ability to reduce IRO caseloads further.

## 5.7. Timeliness of Reviews

**Table 3: Timeliness of Reviews**

Reviews within timescales by Quarter 2016 - Feb 2017					2016/Feb 2017	2015/16	2014/15
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4			
Reviews	96.5%	95.3%	93.3%	No Data	95%	93.1%	82.7%

*Note: No Data available for Quarter 4 due to changes in the client data base*

5.8. Table 3 reports the percentage of looked after children who had all their reviews on time within the reporting period. At the time of writing this report there is no data available for Q4 due to the migration to a new computer based system at the end of January 2017. There is a service target for review timeliness of 90%. The service had met this target by February 2017 at 95% and increased those children having their meeting on time from preceding years of 82.7% 2014/15 and 93.1% 2015/16. The increase in IRO recruitment to vacancies and two additional posts to the Unit has helped in reaching this target. The increasing number of CP plans and

LAC within the service requires the IRO Unit to continue to monitor and review timeliness as throughout the next 12 months to ensure this progress is maintained .

## 5.9. Participation in Reviews

**Table 4: Method and Percentage LAC Participating in their Review taken from the IRO Monitoring Form**

				Historical	
		2016/ 2017	2016/ 2017	2015/2016	2014/2015
Code	Method	Figure	Percent		
PN0	Child under 4 at the time of Review	262	19.5%	15.6%	8.5%
PN1	Attends or speaks for him/herself	379	28%	33%	34%
PN2	Attends, views rep. by Advocate	20	1.5%	2.9%	2%
PN3	Attends, views conveyed non-verbally	13	1%	0.4%	2%
PN4	Attends, but does not convey views	21	2%	2%	1%
PN5	Does not attend but briefs an advocate	123	9%	10.2%	10%
PN6	Does not attend but conveys in wri. Etc.	504	37%	34%	41.5%
PN7	Does not attend nor views conveyed	28	2%	1.9%	1%
<b>Total</b>		<b>1350</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

*Note: No Data available for Quarter 4 due to system change over, manual monitoring sheets integrated into the system and reports not available.*

- 5.10. Table 4 demonstrates within the reporting period that 78.5% of Looked After Children contributed to the review of their care, with only 2% not contributing by choice, and 19.5% by virtue of their age. There were 32.5% of children attending their Review. The percentages are low and the IRO Unit recognises that this needs to improve. Children participating and being involved in their review and their Care Plan is important and this is an area that needs to be improved by the IRO Unit over the next year.

**Table 5: Number of Children and Young People Chairing or Co-Chairing their own Review:**

Number of Reviews Chaired and Co-Chaired by Young People			
	2016/2017	2015/16	2014/2015
Reviews	60	41	181

- 5.11. Historically (2014/15) the number of children chairing or co-chairing their reviews looks high in Table 5. This is due to how the data was collected and an interpretation by some IROs of

children chairing/co-chairing their meetings that was based on children attending their reviews rather than actually co-chairing their meeting. This practice has now ceased and the data is more reflective and accurate regarding children chairing/co-chairing their reviews.

5.12. The IRO Handbook states *'It is hoped that for many older children and young people, especially as they begin to plan for independence, the IRO will hand over at least part of the chairing role to them so that they can take an increased ownership of the meeting'* (IRO Handbook para.3.37). The last 2 years has begun to reflect a more accurate capture of children truly chairing/co-chairing their meetings. 2016/17 sees an increase of 15 children. Moving forward we know that there will only be a relatively small number of children or young people who wish to Chair or Co-Chair their review but we need to ensure that the opportunity is there should children wish to do so. The IRO Unit will continue to encourage all children and young people to consider Chairing or Co-Chairing their review and ensure that they are supported to do so.

**5.13. Consultation Prior to Reviews**

**Table 7: Percentage of children and young people seen and spoken to by the IRO prior to the Review**

Number of Children Seen and Spoken to prior to the Review							
						Historical	
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	2016/17	2015/16	2014/15
Seen	183	206	300	292	981	634	832
Not Seen	159	168	106	79	512	336	261

5.14. There is a statutory expectation that children and young people are visited by the IRO and consulted with prior to the review of their care and Care Plan. However, the IRO Handbook does acknowledge that there are some circumstances where the IRO will use their discretion and determine whether this is necessary or not.

5.15. During the reporting period, the IRO Unit recognised that their visits to children were below what is expected of a Sandwell IRO. The IROs have strived for every child to have an IRO visit and if this isn't possible then a contact. The purpose of the visit is not just to consult with the child or young person but to ensure that the IRO is assuring themselves that the child is thriving in their placement and the information that is being given by professionals and family can be evidenced. This standard has been a challenge to the IRO Unit and following a drive to improve visits during November 2016 the data for Q3 shows an uplift of children having their visits. The IRO Unit want to continue to improve over the coming year.



## 5.16. Consultation using MoMo (Mind of My Own App)

In order to increase the participation of children and young people the MoMo (Mind of My Own) App was introduced in October 2016.

**Table 7a - Number of staff trained to use Momo**

STAFF TRAINED:	Q1 Apr-June	Q2 July-Sep	Q3 Oct-Dec	Q4 Jan-Feb
Social Workers (LAC)	N/A	19	2	0
IROs	N/A	13	4	0
Social Workers (Care Mgt)	N/A	0	0	0
Foster Carers	N/A	0	0	0
Other Professionals	N/A	10	10	5
<b>Total</b>	N/A	42	16	5

**Table 7b - The number of statements made by children and young people**

ACTIVITY:	Q1 Apr-June	Q2 July-Sep	Q3 Oct-Dec	Q4 Jan-Feb
Share Good News	N/A	1	13	5
Change	N/A	0	4	3
Worker Visiting	N/A	10	20	10
Preparation for Meeting	N/A	4	7	3
Problem	N/A	0	4	1
<b>Total</b>	N/A	15	48	22

5.17 Table 7a evidences that 58 staff (including IROs and LAC staff) were trained during Sept/Oct 2016, to use MoMo. Foster Carers and Care Mgt staff are due to be trained between April and June 2017. Table 7b demonstrates that there has been a slow start after an initial burst of activity, with 85 MoMo statements made over the first 6 months. There is further work to do with the IRO Unit and SW service to increase the usage of MoMo as a consultation tool to ensure it is embedded within the service. 5 children raised MoMo statements that said that they had a problem. All 5 children wished to raise their problem as an informal complaint rather than as a formal complaint through the Complaints Officer. The informal complaints were sent to the Social Worker, IRO and Team Manager by the Participation Team. In all cases where children raise an issue as a problem the Participation Team keep a record and track these to ensure that the problems are resolved for children. In all 5 cases, the problem was resolved. Table 7c (below) evidences the outcomes for the children.

**Table 7c - Outcomes of problems raised by children on MoMo**

Date of Problem	Outline of the Problem in Child's Voice	Problem Sent to	Informal/Formal Problem	Outcome for the child from Worker
15.09.16	I'm not sure what I want to do, I don't want to use this app.	SW	Informal	Young person is aware of the MOMO app but has stated that he is not interested in using it. Young person stated that he would prefer to text Social Worker instead and then shared his mobile number.
06.10.16	Waiting for my social worker to send my mom's letter as she told me that she will post it over a month ago, I just want my letter.	Team Manager	Informal	The letter was completed by the social worker as instructed by the Team Manager.
20.11.16	Not listened to, wrong decision, and want to talk someone and want to be heard.	IRO & SW	Informal	Discussion between IRO & Social Worker around regular contact with young person. Social Worker made contact with young person to inform them they contact any time.
23.11.16	Was due to have contact today and didn't get picked up. Want contact next week. Want to know what's happened.	SW	Informal	This was explained to the young person due to no contact worker being available and contact was arranged at a later date.
14.01.17	Haven't received my Independent Living Allowance and want an explanation.	SW	Informal	This issue was resolved, the issue was due to ILA payments delayed due to Christmas. Young person was given the option to pick up or wait, young person chose to wait to receive 2 payments through the bank.

5.18 To ensure that there is a variety of consultation methods, work was undertaken in Q4 of the reporting period to design and introduce consultation documents that can be sent out to family, carers and children. This has been launched in April 2017 and will be another method of consultation with children and young people.

5.19 In addition, the IRO Unit is keen to know what children and young people think of their IRO and how their reviews are run. Over the next 12 months the IRO Unit will be engaging children and young people in a feedback survey. It is envisaged that feedback will be gathered by the Participation Team each year.

## 5.20 Distribution of Review Records

**Table 8 - Data for - Number of records distributed within 20 working days (number and % within 20 working days and outside of 20 working days – Quarters and Total for the year).**

Activity 2016/17	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Total
LAC Minutes completed in timescale	n/a	207	222	n/a	429
LAC Minutes completed out of timescale	n/a	154	140	n/a	294

*Note: No Data available for Quarter 4 due to system change over, manual monitoring sheets integrated into the system and reports not available.*

5.21 During the reported period Q2 the IRO Unit started to gather information regarding how quickly children, parents and professionals received their review minutes and recommendations. It also measured whether they received their minutes within the 20 working days set out in the IRO Handbook. The change of systems from ICS to LCS in January 2017 meant that the data was not available for Q4. This will need to continue to be worked on and improved by the IRO Unit during the next year.

## 6 Profile of Looked After Children in Sandwell

### 6.1 Number of Looked After Children

**Table 9: Number of Children and Young People in Care (excluding Short Breaks)**

Number of LAC						Historical		Comparators	
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	2016- 2017 (Avg)	2015/16	2014/15	Regional	National
<b>Number</b>	555	593	589	608	586	533	544	n/a	676
<b>No. Per 10k</b>	72.2	77.1	76.6	79.1	76.2	69.3	70.8	135	89.2

6.2 Within the reporting period there has been a steady increase of Looked After children in Sandwell. The number of LAC is still slightly lower than the national average as evidenced in Table 9. The increase in Sandwell is due to the strengthening and robustness of the application of thresholds.

In addition, there have been an increased number of children subject to Public Law Outline (PLO) followed by care proceedings. The service predicts that the numbers of LAC will increase again over the next 12 months and be more in line with the national levels. This is based on a number of legacy cases where children have experienced delay and these are now being progressed. The increased numbers are also projected on the size and level of deprivation in Sandwell, and the proportion of children per 10,000 expected to be LAC for the size of Sandwell, together with a number of legacy cases. To manage this there has been a strengthening of the process for children coming into care with a multi-agency Resources and Placement Panel, offering oversight, monitoring, and scrutiny.

### 6.3 Gender of Looked After Children/CP

**Table 10: Number of Children in Care by Gender**

Number of LAC						Historical	
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	2016-2017	2015/16	2014/15
<b>Number</b>	555	593	589	608	586	534	551
<b>Male</b>	310	328	328	347	328 (56%)	293 (55%)	313 (57%)
<b>Female</b>	245	265	261	261	258 (44%)	241 (45%)	238 (43%)

6.4 Within the reporting year the number of female and male looked after children is broadly representative of Sandwell's population and Table 10 evidences that over the last 3 years the percentage of LAC has only fluctuated slightly.

### 6.5 Ethnicity of Looked After Children/CP

**Table 11: Percentage of Children in Care by Ethnicity at Year End**

Ethnicity	2016/2017		2015/2016	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
White	363	60%	321	60%
Mixed	111	18%	88	17%
Asian or Asian British	77	13%	54	10%
Black or Black British	39	6%	35	7%
Other	0	0%	33	6%
Not Recorded	18	3%	3	0%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>608</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>534</b>	<b>100%</b>

6.6 Within the reporting year the ethnicity of looked after children in Sandwell is broadly representative of Sandwell's population and Table 11 evidences that there has been a slight increase of Asian/British Asian children and the increased numbers of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Minors is likely to account for the marginal increase.

6.7 The Fostering service has recognised as part of the fostering marketing plan that an increase of recruitment to carers from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, to reflect the LAC population, is required.

## 6.8 Age of Looked After Children/CP

**Table 12: Number of Children by Age at Period End**

Children by Age						Historical	
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	2016-2017	2015/16	2014/15
<b>Under 1yr</b>	30	44	37	36	37 (6.3%)	30 (5.6%)	25 (4.5%)
<b>1-4yrs</b>	85	96	90	107	95 (16.2%)	78 (14.6%)	92 (16.7%)
<b>5-9yrs</b>	125	130	124	137	129 (22%)	115 (21.5%)	123 (22.3%)
<b>10-15yrs</b>	212	215	220	217	216 (36.8%)	212 (39.7%)	219 (39.7%)
<b>Over 16yrs</b>	103	108	118	111	110 (18.7%)	99 (18.5%)	93 (16.8%)
<b>Total</b>	555	593	589	608	587	534	552

6.9 Within the reporting period, there have been some slight changes in the age profile of children and young people in care. There has been a 2.3% increase in the number of babies and 1-4 year olds becoming looked after children. This difference starts to reflect improvements in assessment practice, earlier intervention and improved decision making whilst children are still young. Looked after children aged 10-15 years old have shown a 2.9% decrease in numbers. This reduction may reflect a greater edge of care focus by the Family Support Team and Multi-Systemic Therapy Service within the reporting period. A Permanency Monitoring Group to ensure that as children come into care that they don't stay in care too long started in Q4 of the reporting period.

## 6.10 Time in Care of Looked After Children

**Table 13: Number of Children by Period of Care at Period End**

Children by Care Length						Historical	
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	2016-2017	2015/16	2014/15
<b>Less than 6mths</b>	85	113	89	94	95 (16.2%)	85(15.9%)	65 (11.9%)
<b>6-12mths</b>	67	75	81	96	80 (13.7%)	51(9.5%)	46 (8.4%)
<b>1-2 yrs</b>	73	79	93	98	86 (14.7%)	69(12.9%)	71 (13.1%)
<b>2-5 yrs</b>	171	164	150	136	155 (26.5%)	180 (33.7%)	198(33.1%)
<b>More than 5yrs</b>	159	162	176	184	170 (29.0%)	149 (27.9%)	164 (30.0%)
<b>Total</b>	555	593	589	608	586	534	544

6.11 Within the reporting period, there has been an increase of 4.5% of looked after children who have been in care less than 12 months compared to last year. This reflects that more children have come into care in Sandwell over the last 12 months and evidences the start of improvements in assessment practice, and improved decision making for children and young people cared for by the service. The decrease of 7.2% for those children and young people cared for between 2-5 years evidences the focus on securing permanency by way of Special Guardianship, Child Arrangement Orders and discharge of Care Orders following care proceedings. The number of looked after young people over 5 years has remained stable with only a slight increase of 1.1%. It is expected that there will always be a cohort of children who are long term looked after children.

## 6.12 Legal Status of Looked After Children

**Table 14: Legal Status of Children and Young People in Care as Percentage of whole**

Legal Status %									
					Historical				
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	2016/ 2017	2015/ 2016	2014/ 2015	Regional	National
Care Orders	59%	54%	57%	55%	56%	62%	65%	No Data	42%
Interim Care Orders	13%	21%	19%	20%	18%	12%	9%	No Data	17%
Accom. S20	18%	16%	15%	14%	16%	16%	16%	No Data	27%
Placement Order	9%	8%	8%	10%	9%	11%	10%	No Data	14%
Other	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	0%	1%	No Data	0%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	No Data	100%

6.13 Within the reporting period, there has been a continued reduction in the numbers of children subject to Care Orders, with a 6% reduction compared to last year. However, Sandwell remains an outlier with a 14% difference between the national average and Sandwell. This and the reduction in Placement Orders made in the last year can be explained through the use of other permanence options such as Special Guardianship Orders as well as the reduction in those children who have been looked after between 2-5 years through discharge of Care Orders. However, as the national data evidences there is still work to do on alternative permanency provisions.

6.14 As expected with the increase of children coming into care in Sandwell there has been a 6% increase in the number of care proceedings and Interim Care Orders compared with last year. This brings Sandwell in line with national figures.

6.15 It is also noticeable that within the reporting period, whilst the numbers of children have increased coming into care the number of children who are accommodated under s.20 CA 1989 has remained stable. 11% of SMBC children are accommodated which is lower than the national average for voluntary care.

6.16 The recent National and Judicial scrutiny of the use of accommodation; N (Children) (Adoption: Jurisdiction) [2015] EWCA Civ 1112 has resulted in new ADCS Practice Guidance for the Use of Section 20. This Practice Guidance noted:

*We share judicial concern about those s20 cases which have drifted without decent care plans for children, where individual children looked after have suffered demonstrable harm or detriment as a direct result. This type of practice can never be excused or condoned. All local authorities should take steps to ensure they do not have a single s20 arrangement of this sort. This assurance can only be achieved by ensuring that every s20 case open to a local authority has been actively reviewed and that s20 status remains the appropriate current legal option and framework for the child.*

6.17 In light of this direction the service has ensured that all children and young people accommodated under s.20 CA 1989 held in the Care Management Service have had their legal status reviewed. All children and young people held in the Looked After Child service will be reviewed during the next few months. The IRO Unit has worked proactively to ensure the right permanence plan, including legal status, is in place for looked after children and young people in care. Despite this IRO managers have identified that there is still work to do to ensure all IRO independently assure themselves that the right legal status is in place for every child or young person. As the service improves its quality assurance work the IROs will ensure that where the proposed legal status of the child is not appropriate and meeting the child’s needs then the IRO will take the matter forward using the local Dispute Resolution Process (DRP). It is anticipated that there may be a further reduction of s.20 looked after children through this process as well as those children whose status is reviewed through the Permanency Monitoring Group where an IRO Team Manager is involved.

**6.18 Placement Stability of Looked After Children**

**Table 15: Percentage of LAC having 3 or more placement moves**

Three or More Placements During the Year						Historical	
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	2016/2017	2015/2016	2014/2015
<b>3+ Moves</b>	54	43	56	51	51	53	73

6.19 The IRO Unit is aware that it can make a positive contribution to the stability of looked after children. Where children have disruptions to their placement or there is a Care Plan that proposes changes the IRO must ensure that any placement change is in the best interest of a child or young person and that any disruption, particularly education, is minimised. The slight decrease in the number of children experiencing 3 or more placement moves in Sandwell is positive, particularly given the overall rise in numbers of looked after children within the service. There are several measures in place to ensure that those children experiencing placement moves are tracked. The

number of complex looked after children has increased and these are the children likely to have more placement moves. These children are monitored through their Review process as well as through the Resource and Placement Panel. There is an increased emphasis, where placements do disrupt, to convening an early Disruption Meeting (Signs of Stability Meeting) prior to the disruption wherever possible. IRO's are not always alerted to changes in the child's circumstances This alert is essential so they can determine if an early convening of the child's Statutory Review is required. There is still work to do between the IRO Unit and the service to ensure that this routinely happens. Changes have been made to the placement request form to require social workers to alert the IRO and IRO have been linked to teams to remedy this.

6.20 Long term matched children are tracked through the Permanency Monitoring Group (PMG). This means that if their placement were showing early signs of instability the PMG can advise that a Signs of Stability Meeting is required.

6.21 To increase placement choice, particularly for complex children there is a drive to increase the internal fostering resource.

## 6.22 Placement Type for Looked After Children

**Table 16: Type of placement for LAC children**

Placement Types						Historical	
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	2016- 2017	2015/16	2014/15
Internal Foster Placement	282	287	274	273	281 (48.0%)	266 (50%)	294 (54%)
External Foster Placement	148	164	163	184	165 (28.2%)	137 (26%)	123 (23%)
Placed with Parents	33	43	54	62	46 (7.9%)	31(6%)	36 (7%)
Children's Homes and Hostels	36	42	39	36	38 (6.5%)	42 (8%)	34 (6%)
Placed for Adoption	26	26	21	23	25 (4.3%)	28 (5%)	28 (5%)
Other	30	31	38	30	30 (5.1%)	30 (5%)	29 (4%)
Total	555	593	589	608	585	535	544

6.23 Within the reporting period whilst there has been an increase in the number of looked after children being placed in internal foster care the overall percentage has decreased by 2.0%. This is due to the increased number of children coming into care over the last 12 months and the internal fostering resource not being able to keep up with demand. This has led to a 2.2% increase in the use of external foster placements. Work will be undertaken in relation to a Sufficiency Strategy to ensure that Sandwell has the right number of foster carers to meet the needs of our looked after children and young people.



6.24 The number of young people placed in residential units has remained stable and this has resulted in an overall decreased percentage of 1.5%. It is important for the IRO Unit and the Resources and Placement Panel to keep this monitored to ensure that only the young people who cannot be placed in a family or fostering setting are placed in residential care.

6.25 There has been a 1.9% increase in the number of looked after children placed with parents. Whilst this is only a slight increase we believe that this is the result of the increased number of children in care proceedings where there has been delay for the children, and the judiciary placing children with parents under an Interim Care Order (ICO) whilst the care proceedings are taken through court. It is important that this does not continue to increase, and for the service and IRO Unit to keep this under review. For those children who are already subject to a full Care Order and placed at home, the Permanency Monitoring Group keeps them under review. This group monitors that assessment and revocation work is undertaken with the family if the Statutory review has recommended this, and reviews delay and blockages that prevent children returning home.

## 6.26 Placement Location of Looked After Children

**Table 17: Number of Placements by Location of new LAC**

Placement Locations	Historical		
	2016 /2017	2015/16	2014/15
Placements in LA	243 (42.3%)	254 (47.6%)	251 (45.6%)
Placements Outside LA	263 (45.8%)	219 (41.0%)	230 (41.8%)
Placements +20miles	<b>68 (11.8%)</b>	<b>61 (11.4%)</b>	<b>69 (12.5%)</b>

6.27 Within the reporting period the number of children placed within the local authority area has decreased slightly in number (11 children) and overall by 5.3%. The largest increase is the number of children placed outside the local authority with an increase of 44 children (4.8%). The number of children in placements outside the local authority but within a 20-mile radius has remained almost the same with a slight increase of 7 children (0.4%). Overall this means that whilst the looked after children numbers have increased, foster care provision within the local authority has decreased and the ability to place children within 20 miles has also decreased with more children being placed externally outside the local authority. This means that some children will have had to have had changes to the stability of their local schools, local communities and may have experienced difficulties in maintaining clubs and hobbies. The IRO Unit is aware of the contribution it can make to ensuring that placements are appropriate and every effort is made by the service to place children as close to home and community as is safely possible.

## 6.28 Health and Education of Looked After Children

**Table 18: Health Assessments and Dental Checks, Under 5's Developmental Checks, Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire Scores and Personal Education Plans**

Health and Education of LAC							
						Historical	
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	2016/17	2015/16	2014/15
Health and Dental Checks	9.0%	23%	40%	86%	86%	70%	93%
No. of SDQs completed	11	165	207	334	334	334	411
Up-to-date PEP in Place	93%	96%	91%	96%	96%	98%	92%

6.29 Health and education are two key dimensions within the developmental needs of children and young people who are looked after in Sandwell. The IRO Unit is aware of the contribution that it can make by monitoring multi-agency activities such as the Initial and Review Health Assessments, SDQs (Strengths and Difficulty Questionnaires) and PEP (Personal Education Plan) meetings to ensure that looked after children and young people are getting the help and support they need. Table 18 evidences that progress has been made in relation to children's health and dental checks in the reporting period but that more can be achieved. The same could be said for SDQs and up to date PEPs being in place and reviewed. There will be a focus on compliance over the coming months.

## 7 IRO impact on the outcomes for children and young people

### 7.1 Dispute Resolution and Escalation

**Table 18. DRPs**

DRPs	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	2016/2017
Informal	0	0	0	26	26
Formal	2	6	11	31	50
Total	2	6	11	57	76

7.2 One of the key functions of an IRO is to oversee the needs and rights of every looked after child and young person in the care of the local authority. This responsibility is outlined in the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 and IRO Handbook 2010. Every looked after child has an Independent Reviewing Officer appointed to ensure that their Care Plan fully reflects their needs and that the outcomes and actions set out in the plan are consistent with the local authority's legal responsibilities towards them as a looked after child or young person. An IRO will ensure that the wishes and feelings of the child are given due consideration by the local authority throughout the whole time the child is in care, and will monitor the performance of the local authority in relation to the child's case. On occasions this means that it will come to the attention of the IRO that there is a problem in relation to the care of a child or young person, for example in relation to planning for the care of the child, or the implementation

of the plan or decisions relating to it, resource issues or poor practice by the Social Worker. When this happens the IRO is required to seek a resolution.

7.3 It is acknowledged that resolving disputes can be time consuming and can create tensions between the IRO and the front-line SW service. However, the child's allocated IRO is personally responsible for actively seeking a resolution, even if it may not be in accordance with the child's wishes and feelings, but the IRO believes that this is the child's best interests, welfare and his or her human rights. In accordance with the IRO Handbook there is an emphasis on informal resolution, with a formal Dispute Resolution Process (DRP) if the need arises.

7.4 In the 2015/16 Annual Report, the IRO Unit reported that the DRP process had not worked well, The DRP process had not been well understood or complied with. This was due partly to the service not responding to concerns raised and partly due to IROs not taking up issues on behalf of children or when they did there was an over reliance on an adversarial approach. The IRO Unit reported that the IROs had become disconnected from the operational service and working relationships with the service needed to be built, so that IROs could meet their statutory duties and appropriately challenge the service where needed on behalf of children.

7.5 The IRO Unit has worked during this reporting period to engage with the service, and relaunch the DRP process. Work has progressed on getting the right balance and making a difference to children. Table 18 evidences that there was a slow start to implementing and embedding the DRP process in the service but following a push at the end of Q3 and into Q4, has demonstrated that IROs are now actively challenging the service and seeking resolution when there is an issue. Q4 also evidences that IROs are endeavouring to resolve issues informally. The service is now more responsive to DRPs. There is more work to do with DRPs. A DRP process is only effective if IROs, Social workers and Managers perceive it to be effective. This work has started and needs to be continued and built upon over the next 12 months. The IRO Unit are working towards having a DRP process that can be tracked directly through the LCS system.

7.6 The IRO Unit needs to ensure that the DRPs do make a difference to children's lives. Below are some examples from the 50 formal DRPs where a difference has been made for a child/ren.

Outline of Problem that resulted in DRP	Outcome/Impact on child
<p>IRO raised concerns that the CO and PO had been made in December 2016 but there had been a delay in finding a family for the child. The child's Foster carers who had cared for him from birth had expressed an interest in adopting the child. A request from the Foster Carers to be assessed for the child had not been responded to.</p>	<p>Assessment of Foster Carers is positive and the child is likely to be adopted by his Foster Carers.</p>

Children made subject of CP Plan in May 2016. Family known to Children's Services since 2013. Children suffering severe neglect, e.g. severe head lice causing scabbing to the scalp. LPM held on recommended that PAMs Assessment to be undertaken. Case had drifted with no progress made. IRO issued DRP in March and again in May as she was concerned about the safety of the children.	The case is now before the Court, the children are looked after and safe.
Children need life story work to help them to understand why they are looked after	The children now have Life Story Work
Family fleeing DV were temporarily housed with the children who are subject of CO's and living with relatives.	The "fleeing family" where found alternative accommodation, and the children were safe.
IRO raised concerns about the child's safety; no risk assessment of perpetrator, CP Plan not updated following Core Group, No Safety Plan in place, Core Group records not up to date, Child's voice not evident, Visits to child not recorded, Family members have not been explored. Child on CP Plan for 12 months.	Child had no unsupervised contact with the perpetrator until risk assessment was completed, Safety Plan written and put on file, Parents asked to put forward family members to support the child. Visits evidenced and Legal Planning Meeting initiated to consider legal mandate for the children.

## 7.7 Quality Assurance by the Unit

7.8 As well as Chairing Looked After Reviews and monitoring individual cases on an ongoing basis, the IRO Handbook notes that:

*The IRO also has a duty to monitor the performance of the local authority's function as a corporate parent and to identify any areas of poor practice. This should include identifying patterns of concern emerging not just around individual children but also more generally in relation to the collective experience of it's looked after children of the services they receive (para. 2.13).*

7.9 During this reporting period, the IRO Unit have raised collective corporate parenting patterns of emerging concerns through the IRO monthly service meetings. This is the first year that the IROs have achieved this. The IRO Unit has invited the Group Head for LAC to attend the Service Meeting to provide a response to their concerns. The IROs have raised 5 issues during the year and the response has been positive.

- **Long Term Fostering** - IROs were concerned that Sandwell did not have an official policy and procedure for long term fostering, and this was affecting children knowing who their long-term foster carer was. The new Group Head LAC agreed with the concern, set up a steering group and had an IRO represented on the group. There is now a policy in place for children, and their long term fostering plans are being progressed.

- **2. Childrens Savings** - IROs were concerned that sometimes when children moved placement that their savings did not always move with them. In addition, some carers were not putting savings in an account for children placed with them. This meant that children did not have their own money and savings put by. The Group Head for LAC pulled together a list of children where savings needed to move or needed to be saved, and this was put right for those children. The Group Head for LAC also put in place clear guidance and expectations for Foster Carers and Supervising SWs to ensure that this does not happen again.
- **3. Reunification of children placed with parents** - IROs were concerned that some children were not having a reunification assessment undertaken with them before they returned home (as stipulated in Working Together 2015). There were no policy or procedure to explain to workers what was required. The Group Head LAC responded by pulling together a document which specified when there should be a LAC assessment for a child in care. The guidance is on Tri-x. This has taken time to embed within the service and at the end of the reporting year there is still work to do.
- **4. Life Story Work** - IROs were concerned that many children did not have their Life Story Work either started or completed. The approach taken by the service needed to change, as a commissioning approach had been taken which meant that allocated workers did not take responsibility for the life story work. Also, despite plans being put in place the life story work had still not been completed. The Group Head for LAC agreed to put 2 life story work champions in place to ensure that life story work was kick started. At the end of the reporting year children who need therapeutic life story work have had this commissioned and completed, but there are many children who are in their long-term placements who do not yet have their life story work in place for them. The Group Head for LAC also commissioned some training which was well attended but there were only 30 places. IROs have issued DRPs in respect of some children not having life story work. Life Story Work remains and issue for the whole service, and is highlighted in the Childrens Service Improvement Plan and commissioned training for the service is a priority for the forthcoming year.
- **5. Independent Visitors** - IROs were concerned that there were several young people on a waiting list for an Independent Visitor (IV) and there was no timescale for how long they would have to wait. The Group Head for LAC agreed to spot purchase additional IVs so that these young people could have an Independent Visitor sooner.

7.10 The IRO Unit needs to build its Quality Assurance Framework during the course of next year to gain a collective understanding of children's experiences of corporate parenting. This will be undertaken in a variety of ways;

- **Audit** - the IROs have started to undertake audits for children subject to child protection. This was piloted for LAC in March 2017 and is due for roll out during April

2017. It is the intention that these audits will enable collective concerns to be gathered to understand how well we are doing as corporate parents, ensure that children's plans are progressing, and that they are involved.

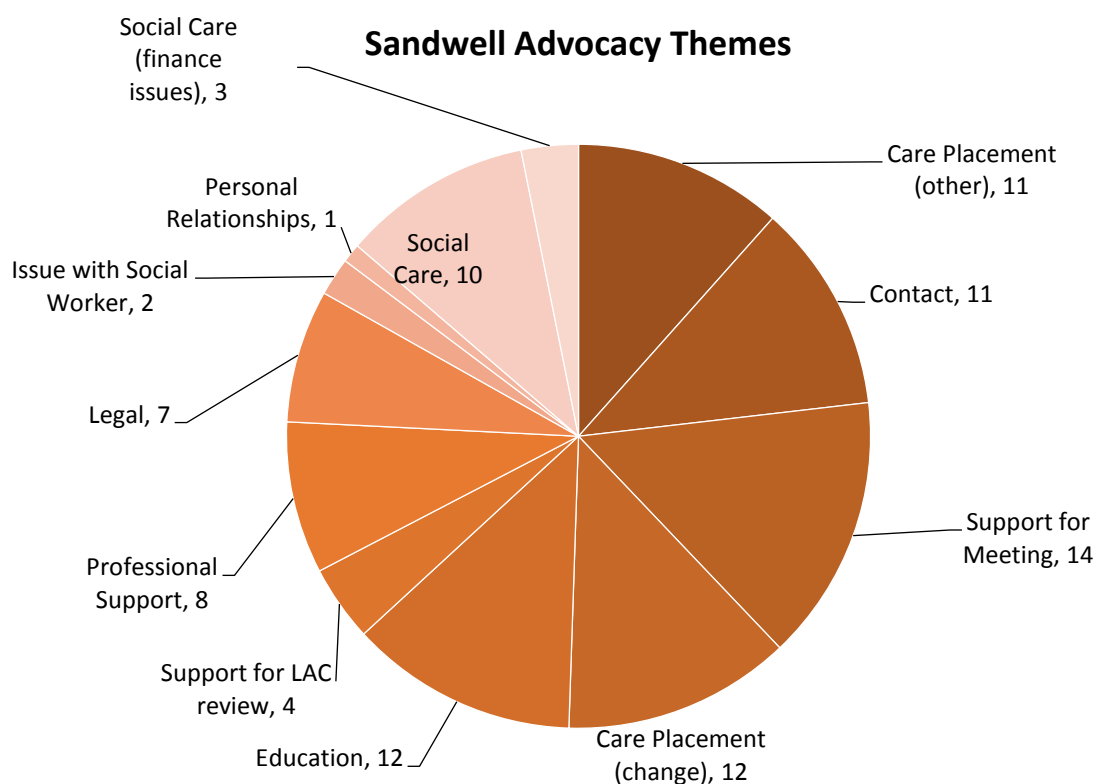
- **Feedback** - the IROs started gathering feedback from children, parents and professionals in relation to child protection work during this reporting period. There is a plan to replicate this for looked after children from April 2017 onwards. This means that the IRO Unit will have the views of looked after children, their parents, carers and relevant professionals to triangulate how well the service are doing as corporate parents.
- **Corporate Parenting Pledge to LAC** - the Corporate Parenting Pledge was launched in February 2017. There is a need to understand how well the service meet this pledge to our looked after children and young people. During the forthcoming year, this needs to be measured and the information used to improve the quality of corporate parenting to our looked after children and young people.

### **7.11 Advocacy and Independent Visitors**

7.12 The IRO Unit continues to have an established working relationship with the Black Country Childrens Society who provide Sandwell with our Independent Visitors and Advocates. The scheme is funded by 5 Black Country local authorities and led by Dudley. The Service offers advocacy to looked after children and young people in care and, if necessary, will support them through the Corporate Complaints procedure. The aim of the Independent Visitors is to provide looked after children with an independent adult who will tailor interaction to the needs of the child or young person. This may include befriending, advocacy, new experiences, crisis support, family support and preparation for reviews or meetings.

### **7.13 Referrals for Advocacy**

7.14 The Black Country Childrens Society reported last year that they worked with 77 young people. The work covered a range of themes (see pie chart below), with some young people having more than one theme. Most young people wanted help and support in their placements and attending/getting views over in meetings.

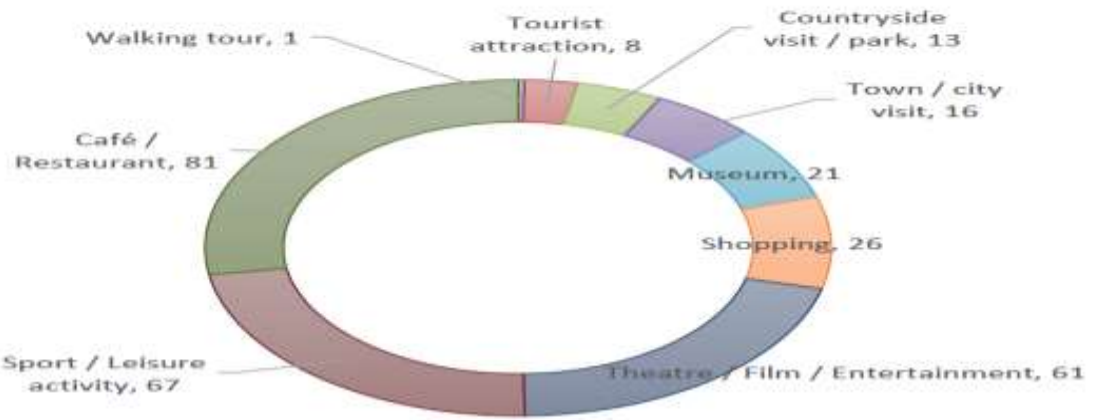


## 7.15 Referrals for Independent visitors

7.16 The Black Country Childrens Society reported that last year during the reporting period 1-4-16 to 31-3-17 they had 39 Independent Visitor volunteers who spent 946 hours with young people split over 200 sessions across the 5 local authorities. Sandwell had 7 Independent Visitors assigned. The average length of the session was 5 hours. As stated in paragraph 9.14 there was a waiting list for Independent Visitors for looked after children and additional funding was agreed through a spot purchase with the Black Country Childrens society.

7.17 Feedback about the Independent Visitor Scheme received 12 responses with 92% reporting feeling very happy after spending time with their IV. 92 % also agreed that they had fun opportunities for fun with the their IV. 100% either agreed or strongly agreed that adults support them, they can make decisions and they feel confident. The reported themes are identified in the chart below, with most children choosing to spend time undertaking a sports or leisure activity or going to see a film, theatre or other entertainment.

### Session Activity Theme



How do you feel after you've spent time with your IV?



- Very happy
- Happy
- In between
- Unhappy



## **8 Update on QAS Service Priorities 2016/17**

8.1 In the Annual Report 2015/16 five key areas of focus were identified for the IRO Unit to work on during 2016/17. This Section provides an overview of progress made by the IRO Unit on the five identified areas during the reporting period 01 April 2016 to 31 March 2017.

### **8.2 Assurance - IROs need to assure themselves that children's plans are progressing and a difference is being made to their lives.**

- During the year progress has been made on increasing the IRO Footprint on children's files. Changes were made to the recording system to enable IROs to evidence on the child's file the type of activity that they are undertaking with children, their families, carers and professionals. IROs are now routinely recording their work on the system. This means that they know if children's plans are progressing and when they see them that a difference is being made to their lives.
- During the latter part of the reporting period IROs have evidenced their challenge to the service when there is a problem in relation to the care of a child or young person, the plan or decisions relating to it, or resource issues or poor practice by the Social Worker.
- IROs are now challenging the service through informal resolution or the DRP process.
- IROs have started to audit children's files during February 2017. They are undertaking 2 CP audits and 2 LAC audits per month and over the coming year, caseloads permitting, this will increase to 50% of children on their caseloads being audited.
- IROs now have a clear route and pathway for independent legal advice on occasions where this is required and all IROs and IRO managers know how to access this advice.

8.2.1 By progressing the actions above means that IROs should know if children's plans are progressing and when they see them that a difference is being made to their lives.

### **8.3 Staffing - there is a need to recruit to all IRO and manager vacancies to ensure that IRO caseloads reduce and are between 50-70 to enable IROs to fulfil their role**

8.3.1 As this report highlights, there has been active recruitment to the IRO posts and at the year end all posts are filled with permanent staff or temp/agency covering permanent secondments.

8.3.2 The Unit has successfully increased the IRO staffing by 2 posts which are also filled. Caseloads at the end of the reporting period are 75 just above the IRO recommended caseload. There is further work for the unit to progress regarding caseloads. There has been a drive on standard setting for the IROs and the IRO Team Managers have worked with the IROs at building a set of standards for both LAC and CP as well as Foster Care Reviews.

8.3.3 Supervisions have been held monthly with the IROs and this is now embedded as consistent management practice. Supervision file audits show that the quality of the supervision IROs receive is improving across the Unit. Team Meetings have been established through the year as well as monthly Signs of Safety Group Supervision.

8.3.4 There is a need to improve the frequency and quality of the Signs of Safety Group Supervision to ensure that it makes a difference. Back to the Floor Days have been established by the Group Head and IRO Team Managers to dip into the quality of practice. This has shown that we need to do further work in relation to quality of case recording and DRPs and auditing.

#### **8.4 Family Friendly meetings - that all CP and LAC meetings are family friendly that enable parents/carers/family members as well as children to participate in their meetings**

8.4.1 Signs of Safety was launched in LAC and CP meetings during July 2016. All IROs received the 2 day Signs of Safety training and during the year 6 IROs have been on the 5 day Signs of Safety Training. All IROs will receive the 5 -day training over the course of next year.

8.4.2 Feedback has started to be gained for CP conferences but this is still to be implemented for looked after children's reviews. This will commence in April 2017. IROs are now routinely visiting children and this report evidences the improvement made.

8.4.3 Consultation with children needs to be more dynamic than just visiting and the IRO Unit has designed a consultation document during Q4 for children and carers and professionals, which will be launched in April 2017.

8.4.4 Signs of Safety has started to make a difference to children's Care Plans. Plans are starting to evidence outcomes, but there is still work to do with plans being child and family friendly, understandable and attainable by families, and firmly focussed on making a tangible difference to children.

8.4.5 This report highlights that there is improvement still to make to children's involvement and participation in their meetings. Most children who need an Advocate and Independent Visitors (IV) now have them, and the service has funded additional IVs to bridge a gap identified in the service.

#### **8.5 Communication with the service - that a good working relationship is built with the service and the IRO role is known with a clear distinction between challenge and support to the service**

8.5.1 The IROs have been much more visible this year with a bank of desks identified at the beginning of the year in the SW office. This was to encourage IROs to work agilely and build better links with SW and TMs. Some of the IROs have been better at using this resource than others. Where IROs have been present in the SW office strong support relationships have been built. SWs have also been encouraged to work at the IRO office and this has been well utilised by SWs. As the year, has progressed there is work underway to link IROs to individual teams to build on the work that has started this year. Getting the support to the service right is important so that when the service is challenged the relationships hold.

8.5.2 Consideration was given to a move of the IROs to the SW Office with conferencing facilities at the SW Office. This had to be put on hold when there was the announcement regarding the service moving into a Trust. This work will be progressed over the next year with an emphasis on refurbished, accessible, family friendly conferencing rooms. These will be available from February 2018.

8.5.3 The IRO Unit implemented meetings between the IRO and the Social Worker 20 days prior to every CP or LAC review this year. These were introduced as preparation meetings with SWs to ensure that the review is properly planned for and progress has been made with the plan. This gives the IRO the opportunity for IROs to challenge the service and allow remedial action to be taken prior to the review meetings are both face to face and by telephone. The

development of the IRO scorecard in May 2017 will inform how many of these meetings are being held and where improvements can be made.

8.5.4 There has been progress made this year ensuring that the IRO role is known to the service particularly the role of challenge. IROs have been invited to the monthly workshops for Team Managers and Group Heads, and attend when they can. IRO TMs have presented at the workshop regarding the IRO role and DRPs (dispute resolution process). There is still work to do and next year the IROs being linked to teams and building a relationship over time through team meetings will ensure that the IRO role is known and understood.

#### **8.6 Dataset and Scorecard - to ensure that the Unit has a dataset and scorecard that details IRO involvement with children and that this is automatically generated each week/month**

8.6.1 The IRO scorecard was built by the Data Team during the second quarter of the year as planned. This has helped the IRO Unit to focus on priority areas eg. Children de-listed from CP Plans at 3 months.

8.6.2 The planned Individual IRO scorecard was delayed by the implementation of the new LCS system. This will be progressed in the early part of next year to ensure that IRO quantitative performance data on children's files can be used in IRO supervision to track progress.

8.6.3 The Business Support Manager put in place a system for tracking minutes of conferences and reviews and the timeliness of these. As detailed in this report this was put in place for Q2 and Q3. The implementation of the LCS system impacted on the ability to report in Q4. This data will be tracked over the forthcoming year, and improvements made to the timeliness of minutes for children, families and carers.

## **9 Service Improvement Plan for 2017/18**

9.1 The service improvement plan for 2017/18 identifies 5 key areas for the IRO Unit to work and build on over the next 12 months. These are linked to the overarching Directorate Improvement Plan

### **9.2 Key area 1. Quality of recording**

- Ensure that the IRO Footprint, including visits to children, are routinely recorded to a good quality standard. There should be a focus on consultation and the child's involvement in their plan.
- Ensure that CP and Care Plans are outcome focussed, family friendly and easily understandable and have achievable goals and trajectories for families.
- IROs to routinely use Signs of Safety in all their work, and are confident to do so when chairing meetings.

### **9.3 Key area 2. Challenge to the service**

- IROs to ensure that informal resolution and formal DRPs are routinely used and tracked to unblock issues for children, and to ensure that they make a difference to children's lives.
- Design and implement a Traffic lights system for every child (CP and LAC) so it is clear to the service which children the IRO has a concern about.

#### **9.4 Key area 3. Consultation and participation**

- Embed consultation documents to ensure that the wishes and feelings of children are known and there is assurance that the child is involved with their plan.
- Increase usage of the MoMo consultation App through training more staff and providing the service with updates on usage.
- IROs to ensure that more children participate in their meetings, and to encourage children to chair/co-chair their meetings if appropriate to do so.
- IROs will ensure that children know who their IRO is and how to contact their IRO, as well as what an IROs role and responsibilities are.

#### **9.5 Key area 4. Quality assurance**

- The IRO Unit to actively and routinely seeks feedback from children, parents, carers, and professionals. This will include a survey undertaken by the Participation Team with looked after children.
- IROs will routinely undertake mid-point audits on cases allocated to them, to assure themselves that plans are progressing for children and there is quality work being undertaken with children.
- IRO Unit will use the looked after children's pledge in their work to help understand for individual children and their plans, how well the service is meeting the pledge to our looked after children and young people.
- IROs to collectively challenge the service and seek resolution through the senior management team, when there is an issue that is affecting multiple children within the service.
- The IRO Dataset to be improved and include the Monitoring Form data. The individual IRO Scorecard to be finalised and used by IROs and the IRO TMs to improve service delivery.

#### **9.6 Key area 5. Staffing**

- IRO TMs to track caseloads and put in measures to ensure that IROs have caseloads of 50-70 children.
- All remaining IROs (and new IROs) to be trained in the Signs of Safety model of practice and give opportunities to undertake the 5 day training.
- Recruitment of IROs to be maintained to ensure that there is a full establishment of permanent experienced IROs who provide a consistency for children when their plans are reviewed.

## **10 Summary**

10.1 The IRO Unit has undergone significant change and progress over the last 12 months. The Unit is now starting to deliver quality independent reviews of the care and care planning for looked after children. Looking forwards the ongoing changes and improvements to the IRO Unit offer the opportunity to meaningfully improve the experiences and outcomes for looked after children within Sandwell. With the achievements made this year, the IRO Unit can look forward with confidence to the next twelve months and building a better and improved service for looked after children.

## **11 Recommendations to the Corporate Parenting Board**

- 11.1 It is recommended that Sandwell MBC Corporate Parenting Board consider the following:
- 11.2 Note the areas of positive performance referred to within this IRO Annual Report, particularly the evidence that the Unit has directly contributed to improving outcomes for children and young people in care;
- 11.3 Note and support the Unit's commitment to better deliver its statutory responsibilities to looked after children and young people, their parents or carers, in particular increased consultation, participation and challenge;
- 11.4 Use the annual reporting requirement of the Unit to inform the ongoing work of the Corporate Parenting Board in raising outcomes for looked after children in Sandwell MBC.

**Carol Singleton -**

**Principal Social Worker and**

**Group Head for Safeguarding and Quality Assurance**

**29<sup>th</sup> September 2017**