Executive Summary

The IRO team is well positioned to have an overview of Corporate Parenting in Brighton and Hove.

Most children and young people have their health and educational needs identified and met by committed and caring people. Children and young people are nurtured, encouraged and well cared for. However, too many children experience multiple changes of care placement.

The Local Authority has now put in place systems to track children’s permanency outcomes.

The IRO service has developed its capacity to achieve the more interventionist role prescribed by the IRO Handbook. IROs are increasingly able to attend meetings involving the child between statutory reviews which allows further insight.

Overall IROs report that Social Workers, Managers and Carers are committed to caring for and improving the outcomes for children and the voice of the child is sought and valued.

IROs in Brighton and Hove have made an important contribution to ensuring the Corporate Parent provides good standards of care and services to looked after children they are directly responsible for as well as those children placed locally by other responsible authorities. They have raised issues where necessary and have worked collaboratively with professionals to resolve issues early and prevent drift in the care planning process where possible.

Achievements for the last year

- Challenge and scrutiny by IROs has improved including how this is evidenced. This has enabled the IRO team to feed into service developments and improvements.
- IROs routinely check whether children want or need a referral for an independent visitor and/or individual advocacy.
- Effective use of issue resolution processes has helped to limit issues of drift or delay and the unnecessary escalation of issues. Most issues are resolved informally without need for escalation.
- Quality assurance and performance management processes have helped focus IROs learning and improvement activities.
- The relationship between IROs and the local authority is respected and there is now a greater understanding of the role of the IRO.
- The relationship between IROs and Cafcass has continued to be a benefit.
- Every effort is made to ensure children and young people have a child-friendly care plan.
- Most children attend their reviews and every effort is made to seek the child’s contribution to review.
Work Plan Priorities for April 2015 - March 2016

The IRO Team Plan 2015/16 sets out the Operating Principles and detailed actions to support delivery of key priorities.

- The statutory function of the IRO role, as set out in the IRO Handbook, to be implemented consistently across the team.
- The IRO team to monitor and report on the performance of the Local Authority as a corporate parent.
- IROs to provide positive as well as challenging feedback to the Local Authority in relation to practice.
- By the second statutory review, the IRO to be satisfied that plans for permanency have been identified.
- IROs to ensure that the child's wishes, views and feelings are given full consideration.

Sharon Martin, IRO Manager, June 2015
1. Purpose of the Report

This annual report has been produced by the Independent Review Officer (IRO) service in line with statutory guidance. It sets out the quality of corporate parenting and care for looked after children within Brighton and Hove local authority.

The report provides an opportunity to;

- highlight areas of good practice and areas for improvement
- identify emerging themes and trends
- report on work undertaken to date
- outline service development priorities for the coming 12 months

2. The IRO Role

The Core purpose of the IRO role is to ensure that the care plan for the child fully reflects the child’s needs and to ensure that each child’s wishes and feelings are given full and due consideration. The appointment by local authorities of an IRO is a legal requirement.

The Children and Young Person’s Act 2008 followed by revised care planning regulations and guidance in April 2011, strengthened the role of the IRO so that the IRO is not only responsible for chairing statutory reviews but also for monitoring cases on an ongoing basis.

The rationale behind this was that concerns had arisen over time that IROs had not sufficiently challenged local authority decisions when practice was poor and not in the child’s interests.

The IRO also has a duty to monitor the local authority’s overall performance as a Corporate Parent and to bring any areas of poor practice in the care and planning for looked after children to the attention of senior managers.
The Brighton and Hove IRO Service

3.1 Professional Profile

The IRO team is part of the Safeguarding and Review Service situated within the Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Unit and it is accountable to the Head of Safeguarding.

The Safeguarding and Review Team has 11.5 full time posts with 7.5 post holders who specialise in looked after children and chair the looked after reviews and 4 post holders who predominantly undertake the chairing of child protection case conferences.

The Service contributes to both the Quality Assurance Frameworks for Children’s Services and the Local Safeguarding Children’s Board, to ensure that the quality monitoring of services to children and young people in care and children subject to children protection processes has an impact on a strategic level.

In terms of diversity, the profile of the service is not at the same level as the Looked After population but is representative of a range of gender, age, sexuality, ethnicity and cultural backgrounds.
Brighton and Hove has benefitted from a stable group of IROs and it is typical for an IRO to be in post for a number of years. It is a priority to ensure that changes of IRO are kept to a minimum. Anecdotally it is clear the IRO is often the person with the longest professional relationship with the child and that they hold much of the child’s story.

The diagram below presents the team structure:

Anecdotally it is clear the IRO is often the person with the longest professional relationship with the child and that they hold much of the child's story.

3.2 Brighton & Hove IROs contribution to national improvements

The Brighton and Hove IRO Manager is Vice Chair of the National IRO Manager Partnership and Chair of the South East IRO Regional Network. The partnership meets at the Department of Education (DfE) three times a year and has a national work plan based on priorities agreed with the DfE.

The partnership works with stakeholders, and crucially with IROs and the Local Authorities they are engaged with, to champion the issues that are affecting children in care and care leavers. It has helped bring about improvements in policy and practice by ensuring the interests and experiences of children in care and young care leavers are known at the highest level.
The Brighton and Hove IRO Manager has created a national IRO website and magazine to support IROs work. It offers professional news; good practice showcase; reflections on topical policy matters and links to articles to support the continuous professional development of IROs. The website and magazine aims to improve outcomes for looked after children by driving up standards and ensuring professionals have up-to-date guidance.

The Brighton & Hove IRO Manager continues to have a role in contributing to government consultations on policy matters, to help make the care system better, and for ensuring that IROs are kept informed of workforce developments including research and training.

Contributions to national policy development have included the Brighton and Hove IRO Managers involvement in the Department for Education Working Group on permanence and exit arrangements for children in care.

3.3 Brighton & Hove Ofsted Inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers and Review of the LSCB, April 2015.

The Brighton and Hove IRO service was inspected as part of the Ofsted single inspection of Children’s Services in April 2015. Overall the feedback from inspectors was positive with a rating of ‘Good’ for children in care and care leavers which includes the contribution made by Brighton and Hove IRO service.

The IRO service works well and effectively ensures that children’s care plans progress without delay.

The functions of IRO and child protection conference chairs were separated in September 2014 with a positive impact for children and their families. Additional IROs are now in post, which has resulted in manageable caseloads of around 70 children per IRO. As a result, IROs carry out their core duties effectively and also engage with children looked after outside of their reviews to establish meaningful relationships and monitor the progress of their care plans, Ofsted.
4. Profile of the Looked After Population

Key Messages

- High numbers of children are looked after by the authority. The looked after population for 2014/2015 ranged from 461 to 493.

- Thresholds for children to become looked after are appropriate and consistently applied.

- A total of 1,180 Reviews were chaired by IROs in the year ending 31st March 2015.

- On a month on month basis the majority of statutory reviews of children and young people’s care plans are held within time.

The following chart shows the Looked After population during 2014/15;
The age children and young people started to be looked after

Young people age 10 – 15 years are over represented in Brighton and Hove’s looked after population. This mirrors the national picture but it is important data to be aware of in terms of supporting families to prevent care episodes and meeting the needs of children once in care.

- As at 31st March 2015, 49.9% of the looked after population are male and 50.1% are female.

- 8% (89) of the total number of Looked After Reviews concerned children and young people with a disability.
5. Entitlements and Advocacy

5.1 The Entitlements Enquiry

From April to August 2013, the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Looked-After Children and Care Leavers conducted an inquiry to understand the differences between what looked after children and care leavers across England are entitled to and the support they actually receive.

The Entitlements Inquiry was run by The Who Cares? Trust on behalf of the APPG and heard from over 1,000 children in care, care leavers, and professionals. The following key entitlements for looked after children and young people leaving care were identified.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Five Entitlements for looked after children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• 1. You must have a care plan that says what your needs are now, what will be done to meet those needs and what your plans are for the future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 2. The care plan must include your views and when deciding what to do people must take those views into consideration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 3. No important decisions, for example, a placement move, about you should be taken without a review meeting being held unless it is an emergency.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 4. Looked after young people aged 16-19 should get a £1,200 bursary if they stay in full-time education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 5. When a social worker visits you they must speak to you alone unless you refuse, it is not appropriate at that time or the social worker is unable to.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.2 The Brighton and Hove IRO position on entitlements

The Brighton and IRO service considers children and young people’s entitlements at each statutory review. In addition it has introduced new fact sheets for children and young people, to ensure that all new care entrants and young people leaving care are clear about what they should expect from their IRO and from the local authority.

The following is a summary of what has gone well;

*Youth Advocacy*

Advocacy can be essential for the children and young people and can make a vital contribution to safeguarding and promoting their welfare and rights. Brighton and Hove IROs have helped to ensure that children have access to advocacy - the broad profile of children referred for advocacy as at 31st March 2015 by legal status is as follows;

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Legal Status</th>
<th>No of Referrals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Full Care Order,</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interim Care Order</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodated S20</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Care Leaver S20</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Helping Young People to Understand their Entitlements

The Brighton and Hove IRO Website and the Youth Advocacy Project Website provides information about children’s entitlements and includes a set of YouTube films commissioned by the IRO team and produced by young people. The films are intended to help young people’s understanding of what they should expect of their IRO and the reviewing process.

All new care entrants are provided with an age-relevant information pack prior to their first Looked After review. This sets out the IRO Pledge and includes key messages for children about their entitlements.

The Education of Looked After Children

The virtual school provides good support and oversight of children looked after’s education. Children in care make good progress from their starting points.

Brighton and Hove IROs have provided challenge about the quality and timeliness of personal education plans (PEPs) as well as involvement in working groups to consider improvements to PEP recording and inter-agency processes. The proportion of children looked after with an up-to-date personal education plan has improved, PEPs are now of good quality and schools are now taking the lead in completing them.

Brighton and Hove IROs look at the use of the pupil premium at each child’s looked after review and provide challenge if required. The pupil premium is used effectively to support children’s academic progress and personal development.

Brighton and Hove IROs promote effective joint working between schools and social workers and where problems are identified, have provided challenge and escalation to the virtual school. This has helped to ensure children have the necessary support packages in place to prevent disruption to schooling. As a result, there have been no permanent exclusions of children looked after for five years and unnecessary changes of school are avoided.
**Care Plans**

Brighton and Hove IROs carry out their core duties effectively and consider the quality of each child’s care plan at each review. They also engage with children looked after outside of their reviews to establish meaningful relationships and monitor the progress of their care plans. The IROs work effectively to ensure that children’s care plans progress and provide challenge if required to avoid unnecessary delay. IROs also provide effective challenge to improve the quality of the care plans. As a result, the quality of care plans have improved and are now good.

**Care Leavers**

Young people leaving care are supported to make a successful transition to independence and Brighton and Hove IROs ensure that each young person is well informed about their entitlements. As a result, young people leaving care are encouraged to remain in care until they are 18 and a high number remain living with their foster carers in ‘staying put’ arrangements after that time. A higher proportion of care leavers are in education, employment and training than those in similar areas and in England overall.

**Other positive outcomes for children**

- Review health assessments are timely and of good quality.
- Children looked after are seen regularly by social workers who know them well and who see them alone where appropriate.
- Life story work is undertaken over time and in accordance with children and young people’s individual needs and wishes.

**What Can we do better?**

- Children looked after’s initial health assessments are not as timely as they should be, particularly for children over the age of five.
- Children looked after who have emotional health issues access CAMHS promptly for an assessment, but the wait for treatment is often too long.
- Brighton and Hove IROs have extended their remit to include one final review of the young persons Pathway Plan post-18yrs. Pathway Plan reviews are subsequently undertaken by the social worker. IROs have provided challenge to help raise the quality of Pathway Plans. As a result, IROs have seen improvements to the timeliness and quality of Pathway Plans but further work is...
6. Performance

6.1 Timeliness of reviews

92% of Looked After Reviews took place within the statutory timescales. IROs completed some reviews in a series of meetings to ensure the relevant people were involved and the meeting remained child focused and friendly.

![Graph showing timeliness of reviews]

6.2 Children and young people’s preparation and involvement in reviews

95% of children and young people participated in their Reviews for the year ending 31st March 2015. Participation includes attending and/or contributing to their Review. IROs have also supported and encouraged young people in co-chairing their own review or setting their own agendas wherever appropriate.

6.3 Progress-chasing between reviews

IROs performance has significantly improved and shows that IROs provide ongoing oversight and scrutiny of a child’s plan in between reviews. IRO communications between reviews are important to ensuring the child’s care plan is on track. The graph below shows IROs recorded communications with professionals such as the Social Worker in between reviews.

The findings from the Ofsted Single Inspection of Brighton & Hove, April 2015 include;

IROs appropriately challenged or prompted social workers and managers to ensure that work was undertaken effectively, such as convening strategy meetings where children looked after were missing and ensuring that risk assessments were up to date.

The IRO Service works well and effectively ensures that children’s care plans progress without delay.
6.4 Permanency Outcomes

Achieving permanency for children correlates with better outcomes for children. Children and young people’s permanency needs are considered by the IRO at every review. During 2014/15 the majority of children in the care of Brighton and Hove achieved permanency through a return home to live with birth parents/relatives (31%) with 28% of children being adopted.

Children looked after by Brighton and Hove:

- At 31 March 2015, 481 children were being looked after by the local authority (a rate of 95.2 per 10,000 children). This is an increase from 465 (92 per 10,000 children) at 31 March 2014.
- Of this number, 268 (or 55.7%) live outside the local authority area.
- 39 live in residential children’s homes, of whom 92.3% live out of the authority area.
- Seven live in residential special schools, 11 of whom all live out of the authority area.
- 387 live with foster families, of whom 56.1% live out of the authority area.
- Five live with parents, of whom 20% live out of the authority.
- Eight children are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

In the last 12 months:

- There have been 52 adoptions
- 28 children became the subject of special guardianship orders
- 180 children ceased to be looked after, of whom 3.9% subsequently returned to be looked after
- One child or young person ceased to be looked after and moved on to independent living
- No young people ceased to be looked after and are now living in houses of multiple occupation.
Brighton and Hove IROs consider the stability of children’s care arrangements at each looked after review and intervene between review if required. Children in care experience too many changes of care placement. Stability of children’s care placements is not good but is improving.

The rate of children having, three or more placement moves is 11.9%, and is moving positively towards the national average level of 11%. The performance figure is distorted by the fact that when independent foster carers transfer to the council this registers as a placement change even though the child has not moved. Longer-term stability is showing an improving trend at 68.5% in February 2015 compared with 62.7% in April 2014.

The local authority recognises the need to recruit more local foster carers. There is particular need for carers for adolescents and an independent provider has been commissioned to develop recruitment strategies and increase the number of available foster care placements.

7. Quality Assurance

7.1 Quality of Care Planning

IROs continue to quality monitor care plans. Most children have a child friendly care plan written in a clear, coherent manner. Children and young people can expect to contribute to their care plan and to expect that they will have their own copy. IROs routinely check that the care planning process has helped children and young people to have their say about matters important to them and helped them to understand what is happening and why.

The Ofsted Inspection in Brighton & Hove reported the following findings;

- When children become looked after, the quality of care plans for them is good. In the vast majority of cases, they are comprehensive and appropriately detailed.
- Children are encourage to have ongoing contact with their own families and friends wherever this is safe and appropriate
- Where young people are able to express their views, these are taken into account in both case and placement planning.
7.2 Children’s Views about their IRO and their Review Process

A children’s and young people feedback system was introduced in 2014 which has helped to ensure children have a say about their experience of their IRO and the review process. This can be completed online using an [online Rate My Review form](#), or a Rate My Review card can be completed and given to the IRO immediately after the review or returned by post to the Safeguarding & Review Service.

During this period, feedback was received from 52 children as follows;

![Feedback Chart]

Some of the feedback children have provided is presented below;

- **Good. She's a star and very nice and funny**
- **I think this meeting went exceptionally well.**
- **Everything went well**
- **I found the meeting very accessible. I understood what we talked about.**
- **The meeting was very good. Everything went well and everything was mentioned**
- **It was fine and I enjoyed talking to the professionals about stuff I will need help with.**

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*Image credits: [Rate My Review form](#) and [Rate My Review card](#)*
7.3 Auditing and Observations by the IRO Manager

The IRO Manager completed 21 audits of Chair’s Reports from Reviews which had taken place April 2014 – Dec 2014. The cases were selected from three categories, where it would be expected that there would be an enhanced level of IRO scrutiny:

- Exit and permanency planning for children subject of S20
- Children missing or absent from care
- Children subject to multiple placement moves

The impact of IRO intervention was graded overall as follows;

- 4 Outstanding
- 8 Good
- 8 Requires Improvement
- 1 Inadequate

Summary of Strengths;

- Reasons for review decisions were explained/summarised
- Planned outcomes from review decisions were clear
- Decisions made at the review were clear
- Timescales for actions were clear

Summary of areas for improvement (areas requiring improvement in more than 25% of cases)

- More challenging analysis is needed by IRO’s in the following areas: Identity factors; sibling relationships; birth family contact; sibling contact
- Rationale for change of plan being explained/summarised
- Promoting effective relationships and helpful communications
- Ensuring an advocate has been offered or is in place
- Ensuring the child’s views are known
- Better outcome focus
- IRO’s making sure things get done
How has the Brighton and Hove IRO service responded to these findings?

- The IRO team has revised the templates used by social workers to complete their updating reports for review. The revised templates elicit more information about the child’s important relationships, attachment and identity needs.
- IROs have provided challenge to the local authority in cases where the child does not have a sufficient record of matters important to their overall needs and in order that the IRO is able to provide effective review of the care plan.
- IROs have provided challenge to identify a lack of relevant documentation for review including an absence of child-friendly care plans in some instances and insufficient attention to eliciting the child’s views.
- IROs have asked questions about the recording of statutory visits and provided challenge in some cases.
- IROs have produced a range of new fact sheets about the entitlements children and young people should expect and these are routinely distributed at the point a child enters care and at various intervals during a child’s care journey.
- IROs have received training on outcome focused practice and this has been re-visited during IRO development events and informed by the findings of audit.
- IROs have increased their interventions between reviews and are recording their progress-chasing activities via IRO case notes. IROs performance is monitored via a weekly performance report.

7.4 Identifying Good Practice, Problem Resolution and Escalation

IROs routinely provide constructive feedback to social workers, recognising good practice and raising management alerts where practice is below the standards required. A formal management alert system is used effectively to highlight concerns and ensure that improvements take place. For example, in several cases, IROs appropriately challenged or prompted social workers and managers to ensure that work was undertaken effectively, such as convening strategy meetings where children looked after were missing and ensuring that risk assessments were up to date.

Ofsted Single Inspection of Brighton and Hove (April 2015)
In order to ensure good practice is fed back to practitioners, a formal Recognition of Good Practice’ tool was developed in February 2013.

In total IROs have formally recognised 14 instances of good practice during 2014/15;

- A child centred approach including attention to equality & diversity (13)
- Building a trusted & effective relationship: where the practitioner has demonstrated particular skill in building a good relationship with the child and family (13)
- Multi Agency Involvement (11)
- Service response: where there are efficient and timely actions and decisions e.g. as arising from child looked-after review meetings (7)
- Effective interventions: where the impact of the intervention has achieved the desired changes within the family (10)
- Quality of Case Recording (6)
- Effective Planning & Review (3)
- Management Supervision & Oversight of Practice (1)

Some of the comments made by IROs via the formal recognition of social worker’s good practice are presented below;

- SW has shown a very real, genuine commitment to improving this young person’s circumstances
- SW has demonstrated a truly relationship based, child centred approach to practice
- SW has focused on the things that matter including all the basics around the young person’s safety, promoting positive attachment experiences and stability and achieving at school.
- SW has managed the complexities of the case as well as the huge demands of getting it into care proceedings whilst managing to maintain good working relationships and a focus on the widely differing needs of the four children.
The Brighton and Hove IRO service recognises the importance of establishing good relationships with children’s social work teams as the primary means of ensuring good care planning. Where problems are identified the IRO will, in the first instance, seek to resolve the issue informally with the social worker or the social worker’s managers.

Performance management data shows that IROs overall practice is in line with this agenda. IROs have had to challenge managers informally on 86 occasions and formally on 18.

Resource issues that are putting at risk the delivery of a quality service

The IRO role is not to identify the resources needed to meet a young persons needs but to ensure that the needs of the young person are appropriately identified and met. The Brighton and Hove IROs are able to report any funding or resource issues impacting on the effective delivery of the child’s care plan. No such issues have been raised by Brighton and Hove IROs.
All challenges raised by IROs relate to a range of issues as presented below;

7.5 Supervision and Training

IROs have scheduled monthly supervision (pro rata) and adhoc supervision. All IROs have a Personal Development Plan (PDP) and are encouraged to attend training. Where issues of poor performance are identified this is addressed appropriately.

As part of our commitment to ongoing learning and development, IROs have had access to a range of learning events during 2014/15:

- Legal briefings including an event with Cafcass on inter-country proceedings
- Children missing and at risk of sexual exploitation training
- Transition planning for Care Leavers
- Permanence planning
- Working with Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children
- Education, Health and Care Plans