

Children Looked After Independent Reviewing Officers

Annual Report 2011/2012



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1. Foreword

'Lancashire County Council have high aspirations for young people to achieve well and reach their full potential. Independent Reviewing Officers give high priority to encouraging looked after children, parents and carers to contribute to care planning and reviews.'

(OFSTED Inspection of safeguarding & looked after children services in Lancashire, 9 March 2012).

The IRO has a critical and unique role, having independent oversight of the child's case, with responsibility for ensuring that the child's interests are protected throughout the care planning process. This annual report highlights the progress made during 2011/12 in strengthening the IRO role within Lancashire. Whilst acknowledging the challenges faced by the service and recognising the areas for development, it also seeks to celebrate achievements and successes in improving outcomes for children looked after.

Although IRO caseloads are high, good performance has been maintained by the team in relation to reviews completed within timescale and the participation of children looked after in their review. More importantly the quality of children and young people's participation has improved. Quality assurance systems have been strengthened, with a greater emphasis on the quality of practice as opposed to compliance with statutory requirements. There is also evidence of the effectiveness of IRO challenge in improving outcomes for children and young people.

A review of the IRO Service has been completed looking at how services can be streamlined to improve the child's journey and minimise changes of IRO. Lancashire is committed to continuous improvement and alongside three other local authorities regionally is part of a Best Practice Network looking at how IRO services can be improved. This will provide a strong foundation to further develop the IRO Service in Lancashire.

2. Purpose of the Annual Report

This is the second children looked after IRO annual report reviewing the work and findings of the Children Looked After Independent Reviewing Officer's (IRO's) during the period from the 1st April 2011 to the 31st March 2012. The report has been prepared in accordance with the requirements of the IRO Handbook, published by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (now Department for Education) in March 2010. This report is however, the first of those reports required under the auspices of the handbook as it came into force in April 2011. The initial report for 2010/2011 was shared with the Directorate Leadership Team (DLT), Corporate Parenting Board and Lancashire Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB). This report has been approved by DLT and will be shared with these forums and also the Children's Trust. It will also be made available to the public.

The report identifies good practice in relation to the work being undertaken with Lancashire's looked after children and also considers areas for further development, as well as highlighting areas where improvements have been made over the last twelve months. The report provides commentary in relation to statistical performance but also includes more qualitative information regarding the findings of audits. For example, of the quality of reviews and the outcomes achieved by children and young people.

3. Legislation & Background

The duties imposed on the IRO's have been strengthened considerably over the years.

The role of the IRO has historically been governed primarily by 'The Children Act', 1989, 'The Adoption & Children Act', 2002, 'The Review of Children's Cases Regulations', 1991 and 'The Review of Children's Cases (Amendment) (England) Regulations', 2004. It was 'The Adoption & Children Act', 2002 that made the appointment of an IRO a legal requirement under Section 118.

Following this the 'Review of Children's Cases (Amendment) (England) Regulations', 2004, was published as an amendment to the 'Review of Children's Cases Regulations', 1991, along with statutory guidance in September 2004.

The duties imposed on the IRO are clearly laid out in the IRO Handbook, along with the 'Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations', 2010. There are some significant changes to the regulations, but probably the most significant of the changes is that:

'The Handbook extends the IRO's responsibilities (Children and Young Person's Act, 2008) from monitoring the performance by the Local Authority of their functions in relation to a child's review, to monitoring the performance by the Local Authority of their functions in relation to a child's case'. This is a major change and involves IRO's evidencing how they are overseeing the whole of the child's care plan, not simply checking progress at each review. Measures have been established to enable the Senior IRO's in the team to monitor how the IRO's are fulfilling this responsibility, engaging in contact with children and young people and checks between reviews.

The IRO Handbook and placement regulations introduced a number of other significant changes which have effectively meant that the local authority must consult the IRO at every juncture. The following are examples of these changes:

- Timescales within which reviews are held have changed in certain circumstances;
- A new power to adjourn reviews if the IRO is not satisfied that the local authority has complied adequately with the requirements relating to the review. For example, consultation with the child or the absence of review documentation;
- The responsible authority must not make any significant change to a child's care plan without the proposed change first being considered at a review of the child's

case, unless this is not reasonably practical. (Care Planning Regulations, Section 32(2) Part 6). The significance of this change has taken some time to embed in practice but it is now widely accepted within Lancashire that no changes should be made without the IRO being consulted and the change being ratified at a review;

- Provision of independent legal advice to the IRO's. The handbook specifies that this should be independent of the Local Authority's legal department. Consequently there is now in place an arrangement for legal advice to be provided to IRO's via a private solicitor's firm should it be required;
- Subject to their age, the child is now consulted about the venue, agenda and who can attend. It is important to recognise that the review is the child's meeting. The IRO Handbook (page 19, paragraph 3.37) makes it clear that when a young person begins to plan for independence they should chair part of their review meeting;
- Review decisions and recommendations. The Handbook has clarified how recommendations flowing from a review should be managed. Recommendations from a review should be sent to a team manager within 5 working days. If unable to agree to a specific recommendation the manager should advise the IRO and all review attendees. If no response is received then the recommendations are considered to have been agreed. All review recommendations are specific regarding the person responsible for the action and the timescale for completion. IRO's robustly follow up recommendations to ensure they are implemented in a timely manner. Where there is delay IRO's will utilise the problem resolution process to escalate issues.

This is not an exhaustive list of the changes, but does illustrate the scale of change introduced to improve the scrutiny of the care plan and understanding of the child's journey in care.

4. The role of the Children Looked After IRO in Lancashire

This role is now statutory and is described in the IRO Handbook as:

'A specialist role which stands alone in the local authority. It is a role that may involve challenging senior managers and may require the IRO to seek legal remedies if the local authority fails in its duties'.

The IRO Handbook details the role of the IRO. Lancashire has adopted the guidance from the IRO Handbook which states:

- The IRO has a statutory duty to monitor the performance of the local authority of their functions in relation to the child's case;
- Participate in any review of the child's case;
- Ensure that any ascertained wishes and feelings of the child concerning the case are given due consideration by the appropriate authority, so to promote the voice of the child;

- The IRO should offer a safeguard against 'drift' in care planning for looked after children and the delivery of services to them;
- Immediately alert senior managers where concerns exist and also recognise and advise senior manager's of good practice;
- Make sure the child understands how an advocate could help and explain their entitlement to one;
- To provide robust scrutiny and challenge to Children's Social Care (CSC) should it be necessary.

The IRO Handbook and associated regulations make it clear that the role of the IRO is now wide reaching and all encompassing. No longer is the role restricted to a twice yearly 'check' of the child's care plan, but is a more involved and consultative process. IRO's are now more accessible to looked after children. All children are now advised who their IRO is when they first come into care and are given their IRO's phone number and e-mail address. Children are encouraged to contact their IRO should they feel they need to discuss any issues. To date this has worked well.

Following the implementation of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 Lancashire Children's Services made the decision to separate the IRO Team creating the specialist roles of Children Looked After (CLA) IRO and Safeguarding IRO to ensure a robust approach to both the review of care plans for children who are looked after and child protection plans for children in need of protection. Respective IROs in each service were therefore able to develop knowledge and skills within these specialisms.

However, changes introduced by the IRO Handbook and feedback from children and families within the Munro Review of Child Protection have highlighted the importance of continuity of professional relationships and a single care planning process. Over the last 12 months there have also been changes in service needs, (reflecting a decrease in the number of children subject to a child protection plan and an increase in the number of children looked after). This has impacted on IRO capacity, particularly within the CLA IRO team as identified by Ofsted in their recent inspection of Lancashire's safeguarding and looked after children services. Following a review of the IRO Service a decision has therefore been made to combine the roles once more in order to ensure continuity of IRO for the child throughout their journey of involvement with Children's Services and more equitable caseloads.

5. The Regulatory Functions of a Review

These are detailed within the 'Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations', 2010 and within the IRO Handbook (Section 3.38) and the review must consider:

- The effect of any change in the child's circumstances since the last review;
- Whether decisions taken at the last review have been successfully implemented, and if not why not;

- The appropriateness of the child's legal status. (For example, if a child is accommodated under Section 20, 'The Children Act', 1989, whether this provides legal security to enable proper plans to be made that will provide them with secure attachments that will meet their needs through to adulthood). This may require that the IRO makes a recommendation to initiate care proceedings;
- Whether the child's plan includes a plan for permanence within a viable timescale that is meaningful for the child;
- The arrangements for contact in respect of siblings, parents, and other family members or significant others. Whether these arrangements take into account the child's current wishes and feelings and any changes required to these arrangements;
- Whether the placement is meeting the child's needs. This should include consideration of the attachment between the child and those caring for them and how the local authority ensures the placement provides the quality of care that the child needs;
- The child's educational needs, progress and development and whether any actions are needed to ensure they achieve their full potential. This should include consideration of the Personal Education Plan;
- The leisure activities in which the child is engaging and whether these are meeting the child's needs and current expressed interests;
- The report of the most recent assessment of the child's health and any changes necessary in order that the child's health needs are met;
- The identity needs of the child and how these are being met;
- Whether the arrangement to provide advice, assistance and support to the child continues to be appropriate and is understood by the child;
- Whether any arrangements need to be made for the time when the child will no longer be looked after, so that the child will be properly prepared and ready to make this transition;
- Whether the child's social worker has taken steps to establish the child's wishes and feelings, that the care plan has taken these into consideration and that the care plan demonstrates this;
- Whether the child is being visited by the social worker in accordance with statutory requirements and when the child requests a visit;
- That timely decisions are made to advance the child's care plan;
- Any remedial action required to address drift or delay in implementation of the care plan to ensure the child's needs are met within appropriate timescales.

6. The Mission Statement

The mission statement of the IRO Team is:

'To promote quality of care and care planning to achieve positive outcomes and to improve the experience of childhood for children and young people in care in Lancashire.'

Principles:

Lancashire children should expect the same good standard of care and support wherever they live. Children & their families should be listened to and informed of their rights. Children and young people's plans should be based on an understanding of the child/young person & their family.

ALL PROFESSIONALS SHOULD HAVE THE CHILD/YOUNG PERSON AT THE CENTRE OF THEIR THINKING.

7. The Development of the IRO Service

Over the year 2011 to 2012 there has been significant changes and progress made:

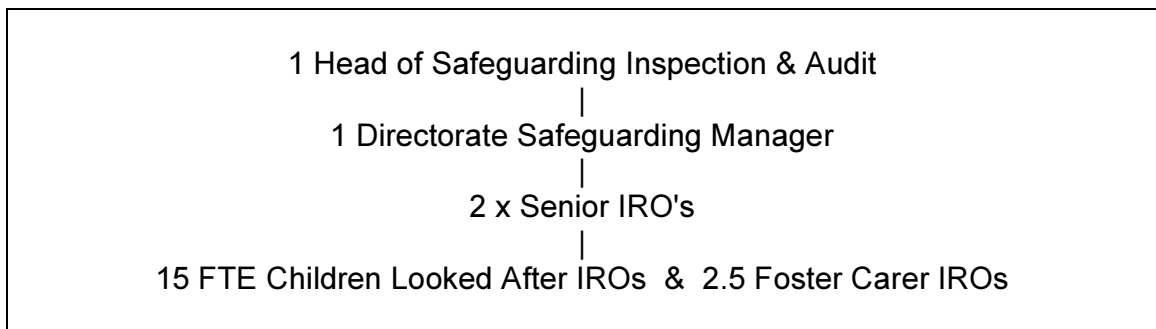
- Team meetings have been developed to be more inclusive and are very well attended. As the team has no effective base the role can be an isolated one so team meetings are essential. A programme of guest speakers is in place and team members present a case for discussion promoting the regular use of reflective practice;
- Team development days are now a regular feature of the team calendar and take place twice yearly. The most recent team day, for example, focused on the team action plan, identifying priorities for the coming twelve months;
- Person centred approaches are now used within reviews on a regular basis. Minimum standards have been developed to ensure that all reviews have some element of a person centred approach. (See Appendix 2: a person centred review agenda);
- The team now has access to independent legal advice;
- Letters are sent to all children and young people when they come into care confirming the details of their IRO;
- IRO's write personalised letters to children and young people following their review briefly summarising the discussion and the recommendations. (Capacity issues do not allow this to happen after every review. This is therefore a target for the coming year);
- Compliance monitoring. A system has been established to evidence IRO activity and oversight of care plans between reviews. This allows Senior IRO's to monitor IRO contact with service users and social workers in between review meetings. Evidence of outcomes for the service users is drawn from this information;
- District/IRO Cluster Meetings are now an established part of the calendar. These are meetings between team managers and IRO's providing a forum for discussion;
- Quality assurance systems have been strengthened through revisions to the IRO quality assurance form with a requirement that it is completed following every Children Looked After Review. This has a greater emphasis on the quality of

practice as opposed to compliance monitoring. This information is used in feedback to District Teams via quarterly District/IRO Cluster Meetings to drive improvements in practice;

- A system of notifying the legal department of the named IRO for a child subject to a new legal order has been established;
- The profile of the IRO's is being raised across the county. Both senior IRO's visit social work teams on a regular basis delivering training on the regulations. It is intended these visits will continue to promote a greater understanding of the IRO role and responsibilities.

8. The Children Looked After IRO Team

8.1 Team Structure



The team is managed by two Senior IRO's (CLA). The team is part of the Directorate's Safeguarding Unit which also includes the Safeguarding IRO's, Schools Safeguarding, the Local Authority Designated Officer and the Child Employment & Entertainment Team.

The Safeguarding Unit is based within the Safeguarding, Inspection & Audit Service which sits within the Specialist Services arm of the Directorate. It is independent of the line management structure of the district social work teams therefore retaining the independence of the IRO's.

Following the implementation of the 'Adoption and Children Act', 2002 Lancashire Children's Services made the decision to separate the IRO Team creating the specialist roles of Children Looked After (CLA) IRO and Safeguarding IRO to ensure a robust approach to both the review of care plans for children who are looked after and child protection plans for children in need of protection. Respective IROs in each service have therefore been able to focus and develop their knowledge and skills base.

Following the Munro review of child protection, changes in service needs, (reflecting a decrease in the number of children subject to a child protection plan and an increase in the number of children looked after and the recent outcome of the Ofsted Inspection of

Safeguarding and Children Looked After, a decision has been made to combine the roles once more in order to ensure continuity of IRO for the child throughout their journey of involvement with Children's Services and more equitable caseloads. This will reduce caseloads to approximately 90 per IRO.

The team consists of 4 male and 13 female IRO's. They are all white British, with English as their first language. Given that Lancashire has a large number of black and minority ethnic families, it is recognised that the team is not truly representative of the needs of the community which it serves. However, equal opportunities policies are upheld as part of the recruitment and selection process and there is always a BME panel member where this is required. All of the IRO's have undertaken equality and diversity training to ensure equality of approach with all sectors of society.

8.2 Post Qualifying Experience

All of the IRO's are very experienced professionals and have more than the required 5 years experience in statutory child care as indicated in the table below:

Name	Year of qualification	Year began as IRO	Year began as Senior IRO
Senior IRO 1	2000	2005	2009
Senior IRO 2	1982	1999	2010
IRO 1	1985	1999	
IRO 2	1986	1999	
IRO 3	1989	1999	
IRO 4 (PT)	1995	2005	
IRO 5	2003	2009	
IRO 6	1988	2009	
IRO 7	1993	2009	
IRO 8	2003	2009	
IRO 9	2005	2010	
IRO 10	2004	2010	

IRO 11	2007	2012
IRO 12 (PT)	1988	2011
IRO 13	1979	2011
Fostering IRO's:		
Fostering IRO 1	2000	2007
Fostering IRO 2	1980	2009

The team is well represented at both the Adoption Panel and Fostering Panels and there is Senior IRO representation at the Corporate Parenting Board.

8.3 Staff Recruitment

The development of the IRO service has continued, coping with the challenge of one of the two Senior IRO's taking maternity leave. A member of the team acted up as a senior IRO for a short period, but due to caseload demands and the difficulties backfilling the post, returned to their IRO role. A manager from within the Safeguarding Inspection and Audit Service then assisted with the management of the IRO team. During 2011/12 three IRO's also had long term sickness absence. This presented challenges in terms of consistency of IRO for children and young people. However, it is to the credit of the team that in spite of these challenges, good performance was maintained reflecting a high level of commitment to Lancashire's children looked after.

In recognition of the capacity issues within the IRO Service, in January 2012 the Directorate's Leadership Team (DLT) approved the creation of two additional temporary IRO posts for a period of twelve months. This was in the context of the increasing number of looked after children and IRO caseloads having risen. The posts were temporary, with the aim, in line with Lancashire's Children & Young People's Plan, of reducing the number of children looked after. This will be achieved by ensuring families receive appropriate support at an earlier stage which builds their resilience and prevents the need for children to become looked after by the local authority. This work is evident within the 'Working Together with Families' approach which has already been successful in supporting some children within Lancashire's residential homes to return to the care of their families.

In line with the County Council's HR policies, it was agreed that the posts would be ring fenced to staff in the residential service whose jobs were at risk in the residential restructure in order to retain experienced staff. However, difficulties arose in recruiting

to these posts due to the differential salary grade and the fact that the posts were temporary.

In March 2012, DLT approved a further request to establish two permanent IRO posts given the additional demands on the IRO Service arising from short breaks, remands and the rise in the number of foster carer's. (The latter are reviewed by the two Fostering IRO's within the team). The additional posts and the amalgamation of the two IRO teams will reduce IRO caseloads.

Following interviews in March 2012, 1 FTE permanent post was filled from within the residential service. The team has continued efforts to recruit to the remaining posts including an existing part-time vacancy which was created as a result of a permanent member of the team reducing their hours from full to part-time. However, in spite of four internal adverts this post has remained unfilled. Due to difficulties recruiting to vacancies approval was given to advertise externally. This resulted in the appointment of 1 FTE IRO who was an external candidate.

At the time of writing this report the IRO Service (CLA and Safeguarding) has 2.5 FTE permanent and 2.5 FTE temporary vacancies. Recruitment continues to present major challenges. 2 FTE agency IRO's are currently supporting the Safeguarding IRO Team and secondment opportunities from other services within the Directorate are also being explored. Following the outcome of job evaluation in Lancashire, IRO's are now paid at the higher end of the social work salary scale. There is concern that this may impact on the ability to recruit experienced candidates to vacancies within the team.

8.4 Caseloads

The number of looked after children in Lancashire during 2011 -12 has ranged from 1,337 at its highest to 1,286 at its lowest. The Senior IRO's monitor and maintain a monthly record of IRO caseloads. Caseloads have been consistently high within the team during 2011-12, ranging from 98 to 133 for a FTE IRO. This is commensurate with the regional and national position, where many local authorities have been unable to achieve caseloads consistent with that recommended in the IRO Handbook (50 – 70). Variation in caseloads is due to a number of factors including sibling groups and maintaining consistency of IRO where a child has previously been in care. There is also some district variation. A review of the IRO Service has been completed and concluded that the IRO Teams should be amalgamated. As part of this review caseload mapping has been undertaken to inform decisions regarding the location of the additional IRO posts.

A number of actions are being undertaken to increase IRO capacity in order to reduce caseloads. IRO capacity is a significant challenge for the service and is considered further under section 13 of this report.

9. Performance Information

9.1 Participation (PAF 63)

Performance in relation to participation remains high with the majority of looked after children in Lancashire either attending or contributing to their review. Publication of Lancashire's 'Care Pledge' in July 2011 (made available to every young person in care over the age of 4) has encouraged children to 'have their say'. Although the table below shows a slight dip in performance in 2011/12, this has to be set in the context of a higher number of children in this cohort over the age of 4 years than in the previous year. In 2011/12 there were just 40 children who either chose not to contribute or were unable to contribute to their review. (950 out of 990 children and young people over four years of age actually contributed).

Participation of children looked after in their review:

2008/9	90.3%
2009/10	89.7%
2010/11	97.4%
2011/12	96.2%

9.2 Reviews held within timescale (NI66)

Performance in relation to the number of children and young people having their care plans reviewed within statutory timescales has steadily improved over the last four years, although there was a slight reduction in performance in 2011/12.

Percentage of reviews held within timescale:

2006/7	2007/8	2008/9	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12
79.6%	86%	95.7%	95.6%	97.8%	96.2%

Although there has been a slight drop in performance this has to be set in the context of a rise in the care population and the increasing workload this places on the IRO Team. This is illustrated further in section 8.3 below.

The table below indicates the number of looked after children during 2011-12 and shows a rise over the course of the year.

APR 11	MAY 11	JUN 11	JUL 11	AUG 11	SEP 11	OCT 11	NOV 11	DEC 11	JAN 12	FEB 12	MAR 12
1286	1298	1307	1317	1314	1325	1327	1312	1330	1320	1337	1332

This increasing trajectory is also evident when comparing performance with previous years:

2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
1300	1285	1264	1293	1296	1352

The N166 measure relates to reviews for each individual child and is a direct percentage of the number of children in care who have had a 'failed' review, that is one or more of their reviews being late. This return therefore doesn't measure performance in relation to the total number of reviews held.

Put simply this means that in 2011/12, 47 children (3.2%) had a late review out of a cohort of 1,242 children.

However, during 2011/12, a total of 3,731 reviews were held. 47 of these reviews were held beyond the statutory timescale. This equates to a success rate of just under 99% of all reviews held in time, which is in fact almost the same as last year.

It is a priority for the IRO team that reviews are held within timescale and every effort is made to achieve this. In the small number of cases where this has not been possible, this can be attributed to the following factors: IRO sickness, IRO error in setting review dates. (This has been where the previous review was held as a series of meetings and there is a requirement to calculate the due date from the date the review process started), difficulties in coordinating a review date between the IRO and the Social Worker and human error by the Senior IRO's when coordinating the diaries of new IRO's joining the team. There was also one example of confusion regarding the arrangements for the review whereby the IRO attended but the social worker didn't arrive.

9.3 Number of Review Meetings Held

The number of reviews held each month is now monitored by the Senior IRO's and is shown in the table below.

IRO	Meetings	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	MAR	Total
IRO 1	Reviews	20	29	22	<u>46</u>	21	<u>41</u>	0	4	16	21	15	12	247
	Others											4	3	7
IRO 2	Reviews	26	<u>36</u>	33	27	26	17	30	30	14	<u>38</u>	27	<u>47</u>	351
	Others													0
IRO 3	Reviews	<u>36</u>	33	21	29	27	29	26	<u>46</u>	25	<u>38</u>	31	<u>38</u>	379
	Others											3	3	6
IRO 4	Reviews			13	33	30	31	43	22	20	20	32	<u>41</u>	285
	Others											1	1	2

IRO 5	Reviews	30	<u>33</u>	20	33	<u>34</u>	24	<u>48</u>	8	9	<u>43</u>	<u>38</u>	<u>36</u>	356
	Others													0
IRO 6	Reviews						5	18	11	5	19	8	20	86
	Others											4	2	6
IRO 7	Reviews	24	29	27	<u>35</u>	16	<u>36</u>	24	25	20	20	19	30	305
	Others											2	2	4
IRO 8	Reviews	21	27	21	<u>37</u>	<u>45</u>	27	0	2	6	<u>38</u>	26	<u>42</u>	292
	Others													0
IRO 9	Reviews	27	<u>37</u>	24	22	12	<u>40</u>	33	20	19	26	19	<u>36</u>	315
	Others													0
IRO 10	Reviews	31	26	30	13	21	28	<u>41</u>	35	18	<u>40</u>	29	27	339
	Others											5	3	8
IRO 11	Reviews	32	34	27	<u>43</u>	12	<u>44</u>	29	31	18	<u>41</u>	38	<u>40</u>	389
	Others											15	14	29
IRO 12	Reviews	18	<u>39</u>	<u>37</u>	23	30	34	<u>37</u>	32	22	<u>45</u>	41	<u>45</u>	403
	Others											2	2	4
Senior IRO 1	Reviews	18	<u>37</u>	10	7	1	6	22	12	10	5	5	3	136
	Others													0
Senior IRO 2	Reviews	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
	Others													0
IRO 13	Reviews								0	21	14			35
	Others													0

Sub Total (Reviews):	283	363	285	348	275	362	351	278	223	408	264	339	3921
Sub Total (Others):	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	36	30	66
Grand Total:	283	363	285	348	275	362	351	278	223	408	300	369	3987

Peaks in review activity can be seen in May, September, January and March. Various hypotheses can be put forward as to the reason for this, but historically these months have always been the busiest in terms of reviews; the higher figures usually relating to busy periods of children coming into care over the previous 20 working days.

During 2011/12 there has been a significant increase in the total number of reviews held. (2011/12: 3,731 compared to 2,862 in 2010/11). The actual number of review meetings reported by IRO's was 3,921, which indicates a number of reviews were held as a series of meetings (190). The increase in review numbers reflects a rise in the number of looked after children, resulting in a greater number of initial reviews and consequently second reviews held at four months. Reviews have also been held early where circumstances required this.

The table above (in the category of 'others') also identifies the IRO's attendance at additional meetings, for example, planning meetings or any other meeting held in respect of the child. This reflects the wider responsibility of the IRO within the IRO

Handbook in terms of reviewing and monitoring the child's case on an ongoing basis rather than performing a twice yearly 'check'. This information has only been collated since February 2012 but will be reported in full in next year's annual report.

10. Quality Assurance

Whilst performance indicators are an essential source of information and help to benchmark performance, as highlighted by the Munro review, it cannot be treated as a straightforward measure of good or bad practice. Consideration must also be given to the quality and effectiveness of the help given to children and families. IRO's are independent of service delivery and have an important quality assurance role within Lancashire. Central to this is the direct engagement of children and young people to ascertain their wishes and feelings.

10.1 IRO Challenge

Following feedback from a Safeguarding Peer Challenge in July 2011, work has been undertaken with the IRO's in respect of their challenge role. An audit by the Directorate Safeguarding Manager and Senior IRO in November 2011 evidenced that IRO's are challenging practice where appropriate and achieving positive outcomes for children looked after. This is illustrated in the following case examples:

Case Example 1:

Challenge by IRO to parent and local authority of need for child to be S20 accommodated. IRO didn't feel this was appropriate. Outcome: child returned home with intensive support package.

Case Example 2:

IRO met child in school to discuss placement disruption. IRO addressed child's fears and reassurance given that he wasn't to blame for this. Outcome: IRO held professionals meeting to discuss concerns re breakdown of agency foster placement and met with the child. IRO informed child of timescale for move to alternative placement. Evidence of child centred practice and that the child's wishes and feelings were taken into consideration.

Case Example 3:

IRO raised concern re delay in care proceedings. Outcome: Social Worker completed statement for court ensuring appropriate action taken.

10.2 Themes arising from Quality Assurance Checklists

The IRO's are required to complete a Quality Assurance Checklist following each looked after review. (See Appendix 1). The checklist has been amended to include more qualitative information. The checklist is forwarded to the social worker and their manager, identifying good practice and any deficits which need to be addressed. The Senior IRO's regularly audit the checklists to identify any trends and share the findings

in District/IRO Cluster Meetings. (The quarterly meeting between the IRO's and Team Managers).

In 2010/11, 1,401 Quality Assurance Checklists were completed. This is below the number of reviews held in the year due to their completion only becoming mandatory in December 2010. In 2011/2012, 2,805 Quality Assurance checklists were completed which represents a significant increase, although is still not representative of the total number of reviews held. The requirement to complete a checklist continues to be reinforced by the Senior IRO's as it is now considered an integral part of the review process. There is a target to increase this to 80%. The following practice themes have been identified:

- The completion of a social work report for the child's review continues to improve across most districts in the authority. There is also evidence that reports are in the main provided to the IRO within time. Reviews are adjourned where reports haven't been shared before a review meeting. This data is now being collated centrally and reported to senior managers quarterly;
- Whilst an improvement has been noted in the distribution of review reports, this is still patchy across the county;
- The involvement overall of the IRO has improved. Notification of changes to care plans, invitations to other meetings and generally being consulted and kept up to date in terms of recommendations has improved greatly. This may be linked to the higher profile of IRO's now within the organisation and greater understanding of their role;
- Over the last twelve months there has been greater consistency in the quality of care plans presented to reviews and quality of recording on the case record;
- The completion of Personal Education Plans has continued to be problematic and is subject to ongoing discussion with Alternative and Complimentary Education and Residential Services (ACERS);
- The timeliness of Initial Health Assessments is of concern and there are still a significant number of reviews where the Health Action Plan is unavailable;
- The completion and recording of statutory visits remains good;
- The Quality Assurance Checklists indicate that person centred approaches are being used in an increasing number of reviews and that checks are being made to ensure the child and young person has received a copy of the 'Care Pledge';

There is a clear escalation process in place and IRO's continue to escalate issues to the District Manager if a response is not received from the Social Worker or Team Manager. However, there are still some examples of recommendations and issues from the Quality Assurance Checklists not being addressed in a timely manner. This is an area for improvement.

10.3 Problem Resolution (Starred Recommendations)

One of the key functions of the IRO is to resolve problems arising out of the care

planning process. The Problem Resolution Protocol provides a formal process for the IRO to raise concerns when informal attempts to resolve the issue have failed.

Starred recommendations per district: 2010/11 2011/2012

LANCASTER DISTRICT	4	2
FYLDE DISTRICT	0	1
WYRE DISTRICT	0	0
PRESTON DISTRICT	4	2
SOUTH RIBBLE DISTRICT	0	0
CHORLEY DISTRICT	2	7
WEST LANCASHIRE DISTRICT	1	2
HYNDBURN DISTRICT	1	4
RIBBLE VALLEY DISTRICT	0	0
BURNLEY DISTRICT	4	4
PENDLE DISTRICT	2	1
ROSSENDALE DISTRICT	2	2
TOTAL	20	25

There were 25 starred recommendations in 2011/2012. Of these one involving two children from the Accrington area was resolved at stage 4 of the Problem Resolution Protocol. Two from the Chorley area were resolved at stage 3. All others were resolved at stage 2.

Starred recommendations were made for a variety of reasons. For example, challenge in respect of an incorrect school, PEP and pathway plans not being completed and challenge regarding a proposed change of placement which wasn't considered to be in the child's best interests.

As the IRO Team has become more robust in monitoring the implementation of children looked after review recommendations (including the use of midpoint review checks), it is

anticipated that a greater number of starred recommendations will be made, reinforcing the importance and status of review recommendations. The quality of recording by the IRO has also improved and all review recommendations have a named person with responsibility for the action and a specific timescale by which it must be completed.

The dispute resolution process is firmly embedded in practice and has achieved positive outcomes for children looked after as illustrated in the following examples:

Case Example 1:

A young person in hospital in isolation. This was deemed unnecessary. The IRO made a starred recommendation with a tight resolution timescale and involved the Child's Guardian and the hospital authorities to achieve a quick change in living circumstances for this young person. This was successful with the IRO being instrumental in effecting positive change.

Case Example 2:

IRO held a meeting with Education Psychology Service in respect of a starred recommendation. The school identified on the SEN Statement wasn't acceptable due to travelling distance. Outcome: Starred recommendation achieved resolution. Child was given place at a local school of their choice. Evidence that child's voice was heard and taken into consideration. Children's Rights appropriately involved. Good outcome to meet the needs of the child.

Case Example 3:

The child's legal status was inappropriate following a change to their care plan. Change was not being effected following an earlier CLA review recommendation. The IRO made a starred recommendation requiring a return to court within a set timeframe. This is now being progressed in a timely manner.

11. Evidence of Good Practice

11.1 Participation

The proportion of children and young people participating in their review remains high and participation continues to be encouraged in creative ways. The use of person centred approaches within the review process is also enhancing the quality and depth of the child's contribution. Minimum standards and a standard agenda (See Appendix 2) have been developed, ensuring that all reviews include some elements of this approach. A leaflet has also been produced for children explaining person centred reviews. IRO's are promoting this approach in discussions with children and carers and the IRO's in conjunction with SCAYT Plus (Supporting Carers of Children and Young People Looked After Together) are delivering training to social workers, residential staff and foster carer's to promote awareness of person centred approaches. This has been well received with attendees feeling able to implement these skills in their daily contact with children and young people. The real endorsement has been from children and

young people themselves who have reported feeling more involved in their review. This is illustrated in the following case examples:

Case Example 1:

Child A commented that he had really enjoyed his first person centred review. He said it had been better than other reviews because he got to have his say in the meeting, everybody else got to have their say too and everybody listened. He also said that it wasn't boring. This young person contributed to the development of the person centred review leaflet that is now in place.

Case Example 2:

Child B had previously been reluctant to attend reviews so this was discussed with him and some changes made. This included checking out with him who he wanted to attend. The review started with everyone saying something they liked or admired about Child B, setting a positive tone. The agenda was fairly flexible allowing for Child B's difficulties concentrating and the review was time limited. He was also supported by his social worker and residential staff to participate fully in his review. Child B particularly liked the action plan developed at the end of the meeting and the fact that everyone was clear about what they were going to do for him.

Case Example 3:

Child C is autistic and without speech. He took the chair in his person centred review supported by his father. Child C had chosen the music for the review and had also chosen the refreshments, but most impressively he presented a full DVD of him and his life, what he liked and what he didn't like. This was an excellent review and a significant achievement for Child C, giving him control over his life.

11.2 District/IRO Cluster Meetings

Quarterly meetings are held between the IRO's (Children Looked After and Safeguarding) and District and Team Managers in three cluster group footprints across the county. The meetings provide a forum to share themes arising from the quality assurance forms and parent/carer questionnaires, information on performance and problem resolution, learning from serious case reviews, training and information in respect of any new developments. Going forward the aim is to produce an IRO quarterly quality assurance report to formalise the reporting process and to assist in the preparation of the annual report. The cluster meetings have been particularly effective in improving communication between the IRO's and Team Managers and promoting a greater understanding of respective roles. An example of an issue which has been effectively addressed through this forum is delegated authority, ensuring clarity of responsibility and the provision of this information to the IRO. There is evidence that this has improved practice and IRO's are checking this as part of the review.

11.3 Alternative and Complementary Education and Residential Service (ACERS)

Opportunities and outcomes for children looked after have significantly improved during 2011- 2012 including improved educational performance in Key Stage 1, Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4. Close links exist between the IRO's and the virtual school (within ACERS). The service provides pastoral care and extra tuition to looked after children and the staff regularly attend children looked after reviews. The IRO's are responsible for nominating young people for education achievement awards which are funded through ACERS. 64% of all school aged looked after children received Personal Educational Support Allowances. This ensured that children were able to reach their full potential and had the opportunity to access 1 to 1 tuition (53% of children) and support in literacy and numeracy. It also meant children were able to participate in a range of activities and were assisted in accessing their chosen vocation and career plan. This has improved self esteem and self confidence and has considerably increased the aspirations of children to succeed. 11 young people were accepted at university and one young person is now attending Oxford.

11.4 Children Looked After Missing from Care

Children who go missing are extremely vulnerable and reducing the number of missing children is a priority for the LSCB. Ofsted during their safeguarding and looked after children inspection acknowledged that Lancashire has good arrangements in place to identify and monitor children missing from home, care and education. The development of a Lancashire Strategy for Children who go Missing will ensure a consistent approach across all agencies. The strategy draws together all existing protocols and procedures relating to children who go missing and will raise awareness and support effective collaborative working between agencies.

The Senior IRO is responsible for chairing second stage intervention meetings under the Missing from Care Protocol and is also the link person within the County Council for the police missing co-ordinators. In 2011/2012, 42 stage two intervention meetings were chaired by the Senior IRO's. (A number of other stage two meetings were chaired by Team Managers during this period). Bi Monthly meetings are established between the Senior IRO and the Police Compliance Officer. This provides a forum to share information and to discuss any issues that have arisen. This has improved communication between the police and Directorate and has enhanced safeguarding arrangements in relation to missing children who have been placed in Lancashire by other local authorities.

11.5 Adoption

Closer links have been forged between the IRO's and the Adoption Service. IRO's now receive a monthly update of all children awaiting adoption and any concerns regarding delay are appropriately escalated to the Adoption Service Manager. On a quarterly basis the Senior IRO and Adoption Service Manager attend each other's team meetings. This closer liaison has worked well leading to early resolution of a number of problems which might otherwise have necessitated a starred recommendation.

12. Priorities for 2012/13

12.1 Implementation of new IRO Structure

IRO capacity was identified as a concern by Ofsted in their recent inspection of Lancashire's safeguarding and looked after children services (Report 9th March 2012). Whilst this issue had already been recognised and DLT had approved four additional IRO posts, a decision was made to undertake a review of the IRO Service to further consider how capacity issues could be addressed. The review concluded that the two IRO Teams should be combined to ensure continuity of IRO for children and more equitable caseloads across the service.

The implementation of the new IRO structure has commenced and will be fully operational from the 1st January 2013. This is supported by a training and development plan, including opportunities for IRO shadowing to build confidence and expertise of the team in all areas of the work. Recruitment to the remaining IRO vacancies is crucial as part of this process in order to reduce IRO caseloads and increase capacity.

12.2 Reduce Delay in Proceedings

The average length of care proceedings in Lancashire (including Blackpool and Blackburn with Darwen) is 68 weeks. Delay in proceedings is widely publicised nationally, the average care case in the county court taking over 60 weeks. The Family Justice Review published in November 2011 made a number of recommendations to reduce this delay, setting a maximum limit on proceedings of 26 weeks. The Public Law Outline has been re-prioritised in a concerted effort to meet these timescales.

In Lancashire the IRO Service has been involved in discussions with the Adoption Service, Children's Social Care and Legal services in developing a whole system approach to care planning in order to reduce delay. Procedures are being updated including an adoption care planning flowchart and the Public Law Outline is to be relaunched across the Directorate. This incorporates the review timescales and the requirement to consult with the allocated IRO in planning for children. A new Family Finding Protocol introduced by the Adoption Service will also speed up the process of linking, matching and the placement of children. A RAG system ensures children are prioritised who have been waiting the longest. The Adoption service is on target this year to recruit and approve 60 – 65 adopters. Performance is monitored through the Adoption Scorecard.

There are now closer links between the IRO service and CAFCASS in relation to children subject to care proceedings.

12.3 Improve Service User Involvement

Improving service user involvement is important as part of the continuous improvement of the IRO Service. Promoting the participation of children/young people and

parents/carers within the CLA review remains a priority. Whilst performance in relation to the proportion of children and young people participating in their review is high, the quality of the child/young person's contribution is equally important. IRO's are consulting children and young people in respect of the arrangements for their review, giving children and young people choice and offering a flexible service that is tailored to meet individual need. The views of children and young people will also be sought in relation to the IRO Service.

12.4 Further develop the Quality Assurance Role of the IRO's

A recent court judgment from Lord Justice Jackson (A and S (children) and Lancashire County Council) highlighted learning for the IRO Service in relation to the responsibilities of the IRO; in particular regarding the children's legal status and the impact on their human rights. Lessons learnt have already been acted on and measures put in place to prevent such circumstances arising again. A Directorate action plan is in place to address the issues raised. Lancashire does not have any other children subject to a Freeing Order. Quarterly audits are undertaken by the Senior IRO to ensure that children looked after have the correct legal status and that where the care plan is no longer adoption that an application is made to revoke the Placement Order. Recommendations from CLA reviews clearly identify the responsible person and timescale for completion. Improvements have been made to the way the IRO records their section of the review report which ensures all recommendations from the previous review are checked and progress recorded. The aim is to create a narrative from one review to the next. The problem resolution process is instigated where recommendations have not been progressed. Systems are in place to centrally monitor the use of starred recommendations.

To strengthen quality assurance within the IRO Service an audit framework is being developed for use in IRO supervision. A target of 80% has also been set for 2012/13 to increase the completion of the quality assurance form by the IRO.

12.5 Improve Outcomes in relation to the Health of Children Looked After

Ofsted in the inspection of safeguarding and looked after children services identified the need to improve the timeliness of initial health assessments and the rate of children receiving a routine dental check. IRO's are monitoring both requirements through the children looked after review. District Manager's and IRO's now receive monthly exception reports. The need for a consistent approach in IRO's being immediately sent the Health Action Plan once completed is also being addressed.

12.6 Short Breaks

The new Care Planning, Placement & Case Review (England) Regulations 2010, implemented on the 1st April 2011 introduced changes to the requirements in relation to children receiving short breaks (respite care). Lancashire currently allocates an IRO to those young people receiving more than 75 nights care per year, or care in two different

settings per year, whilst the procedures require an IRO to be allocated if any level of respite care is received. Lancashire does not currently have the capacity within the IRO service to comply with this regulation. Reviews are currently completed by the Inclusion, Disability Support Service.

12.7 Pathway Planning/Transition Planning

A Staying Put Policy is being developed to ensure a consistent approach in relation to young people wanting to remain in their placement beyond the age of 18. A Transitions Protocol is now in place and is currently being rolled out to districts. The IRO Team has been briefed in relation to the requirements and links are now established with Transition Teams across the county. These links will be further developed in the coming year to ensure the protocol is embedded in planning for young people. As IRO's work with all looked after children across the county they are ideally placed to quickly identify those young people who would meet the criteria for a transitions plan.

13. Key Challenges for the Future

13.1 IRO Capacity

IRO capacity remains a significant challenge as caseloads are consistently higher than that recommended in the IRO Handbook. As detailed earlier in this report IRO capacity is being addressed in a number of ways as follows:

- The Directorate's Leadership Team agreed the creation of four additional IRO posts (two permanent and two temporary for twelve months). Whilst recruitment has been successful to the two permanent posts, recruitment to the temporary vacancies and other permanent vacancies in the IRO service is ongoing. Approval of the Chief Executive has been given to advertise the vacancies externally;
- Recruitment to the 5 FTE vacant posts across the IRO Service. The posts have been advertised externally for a second time;
- Secondment opportunities from other services within the Directorate are being sought;
- In conjunction with the Business Improvement Team we are exploring new and smarter ways of working, seeking to capitalise on any new IT/business processes which will improve the efficiency of the IRO's in completing and recording CLA reviews;
- The Internal Audit Service was commissioned to undertake a review of the IRO service to evaluate the adequacy and effectiveness of the systems currently operating within the service and the risks facing the team, including caseloads and resources, compliance with statutory requirements and the efficiency of IRO working practices. The findings will be considered by the senior management team and will be used to further improve the service;
- A management review of the IRO service has also been undertaken. This identified the need to amalgamate the two IRO teams to ensure continuity of IRO for the child but also to ensure more equitable caseloads. The process of

bringing the teams together is underway. A training/development plan is in place including team development days and work shadowing opportunities to build staff confidence and expertise. There is already some crossover of work between the two teams but the new structure will be fully implemented by January 2013;

- Latterly, consideration is being given to how other services within the Specialist Services arm of the Directorate can support the IRO Service.

It is vital that we are able to recruit and retain an experienced IRO service if caseloads are to be reduced and the IRO's supported in fulfilling their critical quality assurance function. This will ensure that IRO's have time to prepare properly for meetings, therefore improving the quality of the meeting and achieving the best outcome for the child. It will also ensure that practice is robustly challenged where appropriate and good practice shared.

13.2 Quality Assurance

The IRO's are in a unique position, independent from service delivery and with oversight of practice across the nine Children's Social Care districts. However, in the past there has been an over emphasis on their role in relation to compliance and performance timescales. Development work within the IRO Service has focused on the IRO responsibilities within the IRO Handbook and the importance of the IRO challenge role. There is evidence that IRO's in Lancashire are monitoring the implementation of the child's care plan in between reviews and are more robustly challenging practice, escalating concerns to Team and District Managers. However, to support IRO's in fulfilling this responsibility caseloads need to reduce.

14. Conclusion

The positive impact of the IRO Team on outcomes for children and young people is evident in several areas. Good performance has been maintained by the team and the service has continued to develop and improve practice. For example, the quality of children's participation has improved through the use of person centred approaches in reviews. The IRO's have been instrumental in the roll out of training to support this initiative. There is also evidence of IRO challenge, achieving positive outcomes in relation to the health, education and permanence of children looked after. Development work undertaken in relation to the foster carer review has given it the same status as the CLA Review.

The commitment and professionalism of the Children Looked After IRO Team is acknowledged. To conclude, this has been a very productive year and has provided the foundation for further progress towards achieving the goal of positive outcomes and improved life chances for all children and young people in Lancashire's care.

Jude Brown
Mark Hudson
Senior IRO's (CLA)

Sally Allen,
 Directorate Safeguarding Manager
 October 2012

Appendix 1

Children Looked After Review Quality Assurance Form

Child:						
SU Number:						
Legal Status:						
Type of Review:	1 st (1 month)	<input type="checkbox"/>	2 nd (4 months)	<input type="checkbox"/>	On-going	<input type="checkbox"/>
Social Worker:						
Team & Location:						
1. Were the recommendations of the last meeting completed?	YES	<input type="checkbox"/>	NO	<input type="checkbox"/>	N/A	<input type="checkbox"/>
Date of Review:						
1a. If any recommendations are outstanding, for how many reviews have they been Outstanding?			Date:			
Comments:						
2. Has the IRO made a Starred Recommendation	YES	<input type="checkbox"/>	NO	<input type="checkbox"/>	N/A	<input type="checkbox"/>
2a. Is there a Starred Recommendation ongoing?	YES	<input type="checkbox"/>	NO	<input type="checkbox"/>	N/A	<input type="checkbox"/>
Comments:						



If this review was carried out using the person centred model please cross

3. Is the Child/Young Person's legal status appropriate?	YES		NO	
3a. Has it been recorded correctly?	YES		NO	
Comments:				
4. Is the Child/Young Person's care plan appropriate?	YES		NO	
4a. Has it been recorded correctly?	YES		NO	
Comments:				
5. Has the CLA Review report been completed within timescale?	YES		NO	
5a. Has it been shared with all relevant parties?	YES		NO	
Comments:				
6. Were the CLA Review Recommendations sent to the Team Manager within 5 working days?	YES		NO	
Comments:				
7. Was the full record of the CLA Review completed within 15 working days of the review?	YES		NO	
Comments:				
8. Has the Child/Young Person been consulted and prepared appropriately for their review?	YES		NO	
Comments:				

9. Has the Child/Young Person received a copy of "The Pledge"? (Year 7 and above)	YES		NO		N/A	
Comments:						
10. Have the Child/Young Person's wishes and feeling been taken into account?	YES		NO			
Comments:						
11. Is an Advocate or Independent Visitor required?	YES		NO			
Comments:						
12. Are there any current complaints?	YES		NO			
12a. If so who is dealing with them?						
Comments:						
13. Has the PIR, Care Plan and Complaints procedure been shared with all relevant parties?	YES		NO			
Comments:						
14. Have statutory visits for this Child/Young Person been completed within timescale & recorded?	YES		NO			
Comments:						
15. Does the Child/Young Person have an up to date Health Assessment?	YES		NO			
Comments: (i.e. have you seen the plan?)						

16. Is there a Home Placement Agreement and has it been shared with the IRO?	YES		NO		N/A
Comments:					
17. Have final care plans and relevant court reports been shared with the IRO?	YES		NO		N/A
Comments:					
18. Does the Child/Young Person have an up to date Pathway Plan?	YES		NO		N/A
Comments:					
19. Does the Child/Young Person have an up to date Adoption Plan?	YES		NO		N/A
Comments:					
20. Does the Child/Young Person have an up to date Personal Education Plan?	YES		NO		N/A
Comments:					

The following sections are optional and should be used to highlight any specific issues for individual Children/Young People.

Legal

For example - How long have proceedings been ongoing? How many Social Workers has this young person had? Is there an appointed Guardian? Has there been a delay? Is there a permanence plan?

Review Process

For example - How many meeting were held to complete this review? Did the review have to be adjourned and if so why?

Placement

For example - How many placements has this Child/Young Person had in this period of care? Is the current placement meeting the child's needs? Is the placement in house or agency, foster care or residential care? Are there any placement resource issues? Is the homeless protocol being used and if so what type of accommodation?

Life History Work

Does the child have appropriate life history materials? Does the child have relevant identity documents?

Services

Does this Child/Young Person require any extra services and are they being provided? Are there any resource issues?

Appendix 2

Person Centred Review Agenda

Putting the child or young person at the centre of their Looked After review meeting

1. What do we like and admire about the young person?
2. What's working well?
3. What's not working so well?
4. What's important to the young person now?
5. What support does the young person need to keep safe and healthy
6. What is important to the young person in the future?
7. Anything else the young person wants to raise
8. Anything else?
9. Action Plan.