

Independent Reviewing Officers

Annual Report Children Looked After & Safeguarding

April 2013 – March 2014



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1. Executive Summary

'The IRO Handbook – statutory guidance for independent reviewing officers and local authorities on their functions in relation to case management and review for looked after children' (2010), places a responsibility on the manager of the Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) for children who are looked after to produce an annual report for the scrutiny of the Corporate Parenting Board. Whilst there isn't a requirement to provide information in relation to safeguarding, IROs within Lancashire also fulfill an important safeguarding function, chairing child protection conferences and a range of strategy meetings. This information is therefore included within the report.

As required by the IRO Handbook the report identifies good practice and also highlights issues for further development. In doing so the report considers the IROs findings in relation to the local authority's performance in respect of looked after children and children subject to a child protection plan.

Key Findings

- The IRO team is fully staffed and the new team structure is well embedded. However, IRO capacity remains a significant challenge and caseloads are consistently higher than that recommended in the IRO Handbook. (50 – 70 looked after children). Although there has been additional investment in the IRO team, there has been a continued increase in service demand, which has meant that the anticipated reduction in IRO caseloads has not been achieved. This has impacted on some aspects of their quality assurance role.
- There has been a slight drop in performance in relation to the proportion of reviews completed within the required timescale in respect of looked after children and children subject to a child protection plan. However, this has to be considered in the context of a significant increase in the number of meetings chaired by IROs, particularly the number of child protection conferences.
- Performance in relation to participation remains high with the majority of looked after children in Lancashire, participating in their review. Social workers and

IROs are proactive in ensuring all children and young people are afforded the opportunity to either attend or contribute to their review.

- A participation tool-kit has been developed, providing a resource pack of materials for use by front-line practitioners to facilitate direct work with children and young people, seeking their wishes and feelings. This will support their participation both within child protection and care planning forums.
- The proportion of looked after children placed outside of Lancashire's boundaries in truly 'distant' placements is low, at just under 4% of the total looked after children population. This represents improved performance from March 2013 (6%) and compares favorably with our regional (8%) and statistical neighbours (9%), as well as an England average of 12% (at March 2013).
- There is increasing evidence of IRO challenge in respect of care planning, through both informal and formal dispute resolution processes. In 2013/14 the number of starred recommendations increased by nearly 100%.
- A safeguarding problem resolution protocol has been developed, replicating the model established for looked after children. This enables IROs to hold the multi-agency partnership to account in respect of the development and implementation of the child protection plan. The positive impact of this can be evidenced.
- A system has been established to monitor multi-agency attendance at child protection conferences and the participation of children and parents/carers within this arena. Whilst the attendance of statutory agencies is good, the data suggests that a greater level of sign up from some non-statutory partners would strengthen the support provided to children and families as part of the child protection plan.
- Feedback from parents/carers who attend child protection conferences is important to the future development of the IRO team and in shaping practice more widely. Changes have been made to the parent/carer questionnaire improving its user friendliness. This has resulted in a greater level of feedback and a better balance of qualitative and quantitative information. Whilst the

feedback includes a range of positive comments in respect of the experiences of parents/carers, it also highlights issues which need to be addressed. Firstly, that professional's reports to conference are not routinely shared with the family 24 hours in advance of the meeting. Secondly, the feedback highlights that whilst IROs meet with the family before the start of the conference, they are not always able to spend time with them following the meeting. Both issues are priorities for improvement in 2014 -15.

- Stronger links have been forged between the IRO team and Cafcass to promote effective joint working between the IRO and the Family Court Adviser in care proceedings. Following revisions to the Public Law Outline, IROs are also taking on an enhanced role in the oversight and monitoring of the development and implementation of the child's care plan.
- The implementation of a new IT solution for the electronic children's social care record, whilst providing significant enhancements to the previous system, has been a major transition and continues to require extensive additional work to ensure that cases are progressed in a timely manner.

2. Recommendations

The following recommendations are made:

- Managers of the IRO team must continue to monitor IRO caseloads and the impact on delivery of the IRO role.
- Immediate action should be taken to address the drop in performance in respect of the proportion of reviews held within the required timescale for looked after children and children subject of a child protection plan.
- A review should be undertaken of the additional meetings chaired by IROs and consideration given to other options for the completion of this work.
- The arrangements for consultation and communication between looked after children and their IRO outside of formal reviews should be strengthened.
- IROs should be provided with iPhones (rather than Blackberries) to support their communication with children and young people, enabling the use of FaceTime.

- A self-assessment should be undertaken to benchmark the performance of the IRO team against the findings of the Ofsted thematic inspection of IROs and research by the National Children's Bureau, 'The Role of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) in England', (March 2014).
- Arrangements need to be established to enable the IRO team to have a 'seat at the top table' through direct feedback to senior managers in respect of practice issues and the fulfillment of the corporate parenting function.
- Performance management and quality assurance activity should be enhanced within the IRO team. This will be achieved through increasing the number of practice observations of IROs, completion of case file audits, development of best practice guidance for IROs and the introduction of an agency feedback mechanism.
- IRO managers need to continue to monitor multi-agency attendance at child protection conferences. A detailed audit will be undertaken twice yearly identifying any deficits in multi-agency attendance. The findings will be shared with the LSCB.
- Managers of the IRO team need to ensure the consistent and robust application of formal problem resolution procedures in respect of looked after children and children subject to a child protection plan.
- All agencies need to address the concerns highlighted by parents/carers in their feedback regarding child protection conferences. As the conference chairperson, IROs are responsible for challenging all professionals where the required standards are not met.
- A review should be undertaken of all children placed at home under the Home Placement Regulations in excess of two years duration to establish the reason for this. Where there is no plan to seek revocation of the Care Order, a reassessment of the child's needs and the suitability of the placement should be undertaken.
- IRO managers are to ensure the timely distribution of documentation in respect of looked after children reviews and child protection conferences.

3. Foreword

The critical role of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) has been highlighted in the recent thematic inspection report by Ofsted, 'Independent Reviewing Officers: taking up the challenge', (June 2013) and the research report by the National Children's Bureau, 'The Role of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) in England', (March 2014). Both reports have highlighted the need for IRO services to fulfill the

strengthened role created by the 'Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations (England), 2010, in monitoring the quality of care and planning for looked after children, challenging poor practice where necessary and providing feedback to the local authority as a corporate parent. This report highlights the responses developed within Lancashire to strengthen our delivery of this broader function.

Developing greater participation of children and young people within looked after and child protection review processes remains a key priority for the IRO team and the report highlights progress made in this area as well as the challenges for professionals in achieving this.

The IRO team has enhanced its quality assurance function through the recent development of a problem resolution protocol for children and young people who are the subject of child protection plans, based on the well-established protocol for looked after children and the report highlights the progress made in this area to ensure that child protection plans fully address the needs and risks for children and young people, and are implemented in a timely manner.

4. Purpose of the Annual Report

This is the fourth IRO annual report completed by the IRO team in Lancashire. It provides a review of the work and findings of the IROs during the period from the 1st April 2013 to the 31st March 2014.

The report provides statistical information regarding performance and more qualitative information from the IROs in relation to themes and trends. It highlights areas of good practice and identifies key challenges and priorities for further development during 2014/15. The report will be presented to the Directorate Senior Leadership Team (DLT), the Corporate Parenting Board and the Lancashire Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB).

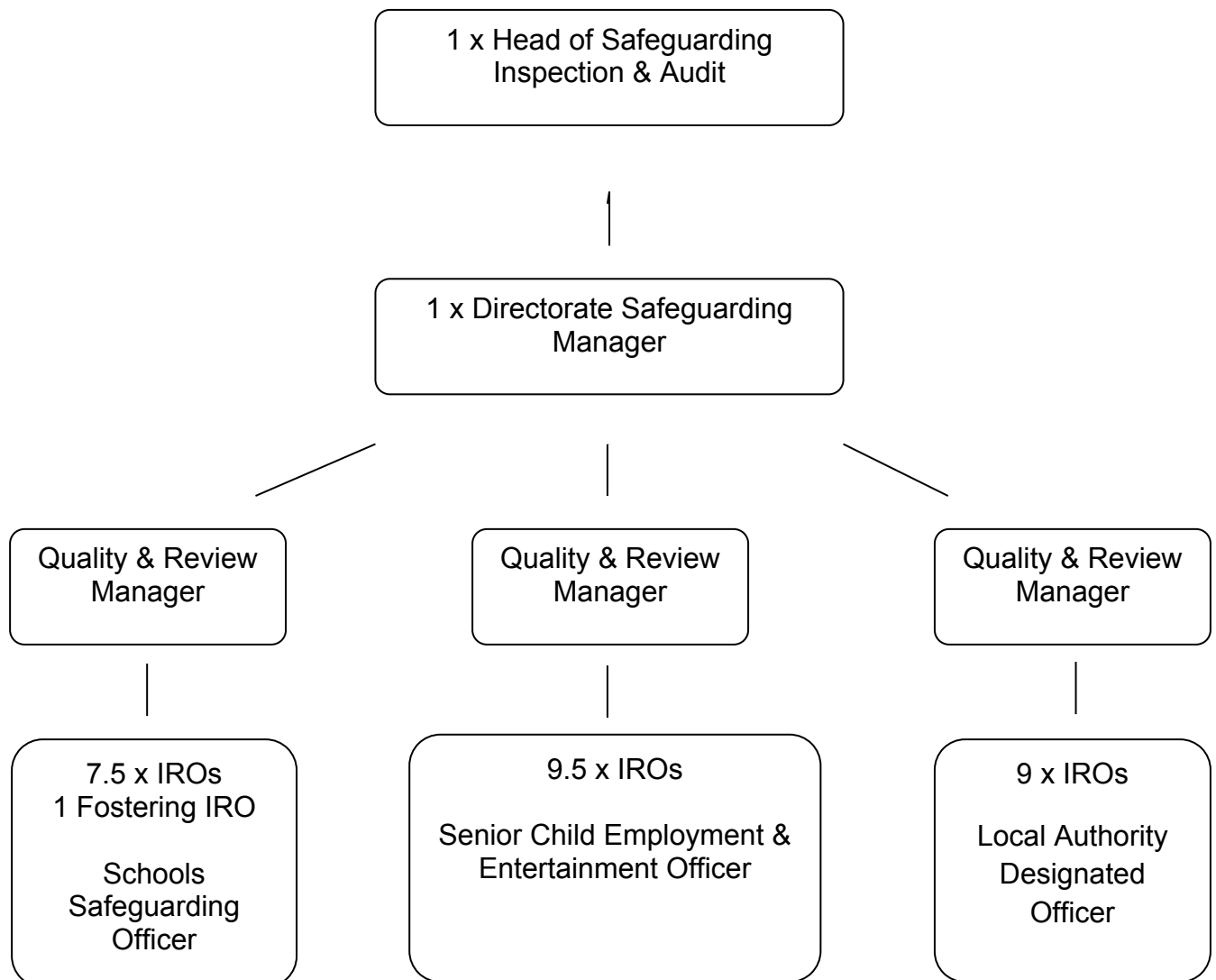
5. The IRO Team

Lancashire has had an IRO team since 1999, responsible for chairing looked after children reviews, child protection conferences and a range of specialist strategy meetings, including allegations against people working with children, suspected cases

of fabricated/induced illness, child sexual exploitation, children missing from home or care, children looked after who display sexually harmful behavior towards other children and cases of serious self harm of children who are looked after.

5.1 Team Structure

The IRO team sits within the Safeguarding, Inspection & Audit Service within the Directorate for Children and Young People. It is independent of the line management structure of the district social work teams, therefore retaining the independence of the IROs.



The team consists of 26 full-time equivalent (FTE) IRO posts, (including one full-time temporary post). There are 25 FTE IRO posts with responsibility for chairing children

looked after reviews, child protection conferences and a range of specialist strategy meetings. In conjunction with the Fostering Service, a review has been undertaken of the way in which foster carer reviews are held. This function has now been streamlined into a central panel based approach, which means that the IRO team can maintain its independent oversight of foster carer reviews via one Fostering IRO post.

The IRO posts are held by 28 staff and the team is fully staffed. Five of the posts are held by male staff and four members of the team identify themselves as from a BME background.

5.2 Post qualifying experience

All IROs in Lancashire are required to have a minimum of five years post qualifying experience. They have all worked in statutory child care settings and several have previous management experience.

A detailed table of the level of post qualifying experience and length of service as IRO managers and IROs in Lancashire can be found in Appendix 1.

5.3 Staff Recruitment and Retention

During the twelve month period covered by this report five members of staff left the IRO team. This included two IROs who retired, one IRO left for an identical post on an enhanced salary in another local authority, one IRO was internally promoted to another position within the Directorate and one Quality and Review Manager took a post in a neighboring authority closer to their home. Permanent appointments have been made to all of the vacancies. During the recruitment period, agency staff were used in the short term to cover vacancies and two part-time IROs also worked additional hours to increase capacity. The team currently has one agency member of staff who is covering a twelve month temporary post created through the Adoption Reform Grant to strengthen IRO involvement where children have a care plan of adoption.

5.4 Caseloads

The IRO Handbook proposes that a caseload of 50 – 70 children for a full-time equivalent IRO would represent good practice in the delivery of a quality service. The impact of high caseloads on the ability of IROs to fulfill their role has been highlighted by Ofsted in their report ('Independent Reviewing Officers: taking up the challenge',

2013) and by the National Children's Bureau ('The Role of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) in England', 2014). However, Lancashire is not unique in having caseloads above that recommended in statutory guidance and this was highlighted as an issue in most of the local authorities visited by Ofsted in their thematic inspection of IRO services. The research by the National Children's Bureau identified a similar picture, with two thirds of local authorities nationally, having average caseloads above the recommended limit. However, based on the regional data Lancashire's IRO caseloads are amongst the highest.

Caseloads for IROs in Lancashire have continued to rise during 2013-14. This is despite a number of measures taken to increase capacity within the team as follows:

- Five additional IRO posts have been created since 2012. (Four permanent and one temporary);
- Part-time IROs have worked additional hours;
- IROs prioritise their statutory responsibilities and do not undertake additional tasks. For example, chairing foster carer reviews, undertaking Regulation 33 visits to children's homes or support for the LADO function.
- We continue to explore new ways of working to ensure IROs have the right 'tools' for the job and to make the most efficient use of their time. For example, a centralised booking service for child protection conferences is reducing the amount of time spent on administrative tasks and IROs have been put forward as a priority group of staff to pilot any new technological solutions.
- Secondment of staff from the residential service. Two residential managers were seconded to the service, both of whom have been successful in securing permanent posts in the team.

Unfortunately, the capacity created by such developments has been overtaken by a rise in the number of looked after children and children subject of child protection plans. At the end of March 2014, the average caseload for a full-time IRO in Lancashire was 117 children. This has increased from an average of 105 children reported in the IRO annual report for 2012 - 13.

During the year 2012 -13 the number of children subject to a child protection plan in Lancashire rose dramatically, with an annual increase of 60%. During 2013 -14 this

increase has slowed, although the preceding year has still seen an increase in child protection plans of approximately 24% (from 878 children in March 2013 to 1086 children in March 2014). Taken together these increases mean that the number of children subject of a child protection plan in Lancashire has increased by 110% from 2012 -14. As highlighted in the 2012-13 annual report the rate of children subject of child protection plans in Lancashire per 10,000 population had been below the national average for a number of years, from 2007-12. In 2012 the rate per 10,000 population was 22.5 and was significantly lower than the region (42.6 per 10,000), statistical neighbours (39 per 10,000) and the England average (38 per 10,000). The increase in child protection plans during 2012-14 has brought the rate in Lancashire broadly in line with trends for the region and our statistical neighbours at 46 per 10,000 child population. (March 2014). This is however higher than the England average. (March 2013: England: 37.9 per 10,000, statistical neighbours: 41.8 per 10,000, North West: 41.4 per 10,000).

The number of children looked after by Lancashire has shown a modest increase of 6% from the end of March 2013 to the end of January 2014 (1,482 to 1,574).

Whilst IRO capacity remains a significant challenge, the impact of this is mitigated wherever possible. For example, the service is reviewing the process for the allocation of new work to develop five allocation areas, as opposed to the previous three (North, Central and East), thereby reducing time spent by IROs travelling between meetings. The implementation of a new IT system for the electronic social care record (Liquid Logic) will also reduce the time taken by IROs to process meeting outcomes and produce reports. However, it is acknowledged that the implementation of a new IT system presents a number of challenges whilst processes are aligned to a new system. This is closely monitored and the impact of reduced bureaucracy is beginning to be felt.

6. Performance

6.1 Looked After Children

Reviews in Timescale (NI66)

2006/7	2007/8	2008/9	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14
79.6%	86%	95.7%	95.6%	97.8%	96.2%	95%	92.7%

The performance in respect of reviews within timescale for looked after children has dipped from 95% in 2012 - 13 to 92.7% in 2013 – 14. The increase in the number of looked after children (rising from 1,482 in March 2013 to 1,612 in March 2014) has impacted on IRO caseloads and has contributed to this dip in performance. Similarly, performance has been affected by social worker capacity, particularly in relation to the demands of the revised Public Law Outline and attendance at court. Long term sickness absence in one specific social work team during 2013 was also a factor, as was IRO human error.

6.1.1 Children and Young People Placed outside of Lancashire

The Ofsted thematic report – 'From a Distance – Looked After Children Living Away from their Home Area', (2014) highlights the duty on the local authority to ensure there is appropriate provision within their area to enable the needs of looked after children to be met close to their home. Furthermore, it is highlighted that whilst some placements out of area will be necessary to meet children's needs fully, in many cases such placements can be associated with poorer outcomes and an 'out of sight, out of mind approach'.

Within Lancashire there are a total of 327 children placed outside of the local authority area. Of this number 214 children are placed within foster care, 12 children are placed in residential care, 39 are placed for adoption and 4 children are placed within secure settings. This figure represents 21% of the looked after children population. The central government consultation response (Consultation on improving safeguarding for looked after children: changes to the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 – Jan 2014), highlights that many children will be placed in neighbouring authorities, close to their family home. Whilst this requires effective information sharing and liaison between local authorities, this does not create the extent of potential difficulties posed by truly 'distant' placements. The definition of distant placements is therefore proposed as those placements outside of the local authority area or one of its neighbouring authorities. On this basis Lancashire has 61

distant placements out of the above total, or just under 4% of the total looked after children population. This is improved performance from March 2013 (6%) and compares favourably with our regional (8%) and statistical neighbours (9%), as well as an England average of 12% (at March 2013). In January 2014 Lancashire had 39 children placed for adoption outside of the local authority (in neighbouring authorities and 'distant' placements) as a result of greater use of the National Adoption Register to secure permanent adoptive families.

6.1.2 Placements of Looked After Children

Of the 1,574 children looked after by Lancashire County Council, 1,085 are placed within fostering arrangements, whilst a further 96 are placed within adoptive placements. This means that 75% of looked after children are placed within an alternate family setting; this rate is consistent with the 2012-13 level.

3.2% of looked after children (50 children) are placed within Lancashire's residential provision, whilst 4.8% are placed within external residential provision (75 children) and again this rate is consistent with that reported in 2012-13.

173 looked after children are placed with their own parent (or someone who has parental responsibility for them) either via a Care Order (130 children) or Interim Care Order (43 children). Of the children subject to a Care Order, 59 children were placed with their parent between 2004 and 2012. The table below provides a yearly breakdown.

Year Placement Commenced	Number of Children
2004	1
2005	1
2006	2
2007	2
2008	3
2009	6
2010	5
2011	8

2012	31
2013	61
2014	10

Whilst it is appropriate that some children live with their parent(s) under the auspices of a Care Order, the data would suggest that those 59 children who have done so for in excess of 17 months require specific review to identify and/or progress permanence planning.

6.1.3 Placement Stability

The percentage of children having three or more placements within the preceding twelve months has reduced from 8.7% in 2012 – 13 to 7.8% in 2013 – 14 and represents improved performance. This rate compares favourably with our statistical neighbours at 10.1% and the England average of 11%. (March 2013).

Although the percentage of children living in the same placement for at least two years has fallen slightly from 73.4% in 2012 – 13 to 72.2% in 2013 – 14, performance compares favourably with our statistical neighbours (65.7%) and the England average (67%). (March 2013 figures).

6.1.4 Permanence and Delay

The legal status of children looked after by Lancashire is as follows:

- Interim Care Order 284 (18%)
- Care Order 805 (51%)
- S20 accommodated 235 (15%)
- Remand to LA care 7 (>1%)
- Emergency or Police Protection 10 (>1%)
- Placement Order 224 (14%)

With regard to children and young people who are subject of Interim Care Orders the IRO team has developed its relationship with Cafcass to promote effective joint working between the IRO and the Family Court Adviser (FCA), in line with the newly agreed Cafcass/IRO National Protocol (2013). Senior managers from Cafcass

attended an IRO team meeting to agree the implementation of the protocol which requires the FCA to write to the IRO at the point of allocation and discuss the case directly prior to the Case Management Hearing. IROs in Lancashire will often have substantial knowledge of children and their families that pre-dates the application to court and can make an important contribution to interim and longer term planning for children. Cafcass has agreed that standard court directions are requested requiring that the IRO receives all relevant court documents from the care proceedings as well as a written handover and final care plan at the conclusion of the proceedings. This information is critical to the enhanced role fulfilled by IROs following the Family Justice Review and revised Public Law outline. The requirement to conclude the majority of public law cases within 26 weeks means that IROs are taking on an enhanced role in the oversight and monitoring of the implementation and development of care plans after the court has agreed the necessity to make a Care Order.

The IRO team plays a key role in reviewing care plans for children subject of a Placement Order and in ensuring that timely action is taken to secure permanence for this group of children. Performance in this area can be summarised as below:

	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14
Number of Placement Orders at start of year	153	181	219
Placed with adopters	65	57	64
Not yet placed with adopters	88	124	155
New Placement Orders Granted	120	144	132
- Adoption Orders Granted	69	75	83
- Breakdown / return to fieldwork teams	23	31	22
Number of Placement Orders at end of year	181	219	248
Placed with adopters	57	64	96
Not yet placed with adopters	124	155	15

The figures demonstrate that an increasing number of children are becoming subject of Placement Orders and are being successfully placed for adoption. Of the 155 children subject of Placement Orders but not yet placed for adoption (at March 2014) 35 children were in the process of being matched/placed, 20 children were awaiting a Placement Order, whilst a change of plan was being pursued in respect of 14 children.

This means that 69 of the 152 children were available for adoption but not yet placed. The creation of a case progression manager and permanence coordinator posts will speed up the adoption process from start to finish, ensuring earlier family finding for children awaiting adoption. The posts have an important quality assurance role in terms of child permanence reports and tracking of cases to minimise delay. They also offer advice in relation to the appropriateness of adoption plans and will assist in complex care planning issues, for example where there are sibling groups. Furthermore, the IRO is required to specifically address at the second CLA Review following the making of a Placement Order, whether the plan for adoption remains appropriate and what action is required in order to achieve permanence for the child. In addition to this task the IRO team receives regular updates in respect of children where the agency decision maker has supported a recommendation that adoption is no longer the appropriate permanence plan for the child. The IRO then follows this up to ensure that legal action to revoke the Placement Order is progressed. The creation of an additional IRO post funded through the adoption reform grant will also strengthen IRO oversight of children with a care plan of adoption.

6.1.5 Participation

Performance in relation to participation remains high with the majority of looked after children in Lancashire either attending or contributing to their review. In 2012/13 the participation of children looked after was 94.7%. The participation of children looked after in 2013/14 is 98.1% which is a rise of 3.4% and represents improved performance. This is a testament to the proactive work of social workers and IROs in ensuring all children and young people are afforded the opportunity to either attend or contribute to their review.

Note: this data is subject to confirmation once the CIN census has been finalised.

6.2 Performance related to Safeguarding

6.2.1 Child Protection Plans Reviewed in Timescale (NI 67)

	2008/9	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14
Lancashire	99.6%	100%	100%	98.90%	96.5%	94.3%
SN's	99.7%	97.1%	96.4	98%	97.4%	NA

North West	99.4%	98.3%	95.2%	95.7%	91.7%	NA
England - National Average	99.1%	96.8%	97.1%	96.7%	96.2%	NA

There has been a slight drop in performance in respect of review child protection conferences held within timescale, from 96.5% in 2012 – 13, to 95.2% in 2013 – 14. (England average: 96.2% and statistical neighbours: 97.7% in 2012 - 13). In respect of individual children and young people this performance means that 38 children did not have a review child protection conference (taking in 30 conferences) within the required timescale. However, this marginally reduced performance should be considered against a backdrop of a 110% increase in child protection plans over a two year period from 2012-14. An action plan has been developed to improve performance in this area.

A minority of the conferences were out of timescale due to unavoidable adjournments, related to a family bereavement, (one family of two children) and the birth of a baby in the days leading up to the review conference (three children). Three other children were safeguarded by means of being looked after by the local authority. An adjournment due to non-quoracy (insufficient agency representation to convene an effective child protection conference) was highlighted in respect of nine children. The unavailability of a social worker to attend a conference within the necessary timeframe was also a factor leading to decreased performance in this area. A significant number of the child protection conferences out of timescale occurred at the first review (three month timescale from the initial child protection conference) and were in part a consequence of scheduling of the meeting close to the review due date, leaving little time to reconvene when the need arose. An instruction reminding IROs of the importance of holding the review within the required timescale has been reissued to the IRO team as part of the wider action plan to improve performance in this area.

6.2.2 Percentage of Children Ceasing to be the Subject of a Child Protection Plan during the 12 month period who had been subject of a Child Protection Plan for 2 years or more (NI 64)

	2008/9	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14
Lancashire	2.9%	3.8%	4.8%	4.4%	2.6%	3.7%
SN's	6.7%	7.9%	7.5%	6.0%	5.2%	NA
England - National Average	5.8%	5.9%	6.0%	5.6%	4.3%	NA

The table illustrates that good performance has been maintained in relation to the duration of children subject to a child protection plan. Although there has been a slight increase in the number of children subject to a child protection plan over two years (2012 - 13: 2.6%, compared to 3.7% in 2013 – 14), performance is still well within the top performance band of 0>10%. Taken together with good performance in respect of re-registration rates (see section 4.2.4 below) these indicators illustrate that effective monitoring of child protection plans is undertaken by IROs and managers within Children's Social Care, ensuring appropriate outcomes for children, either through a step-down with continuing support as a child in need or escalation via care proceedings. All child protection plans over two year's duration are reviewed individually within IRO supervision to ensure robust monitoring and timely decision making. Child protection plans over twelve month's duration are also subject to review by the IRO and Team Manager. This function is also overseen within IRO supervision.

6.2.3 Duration of Child Protection Plans (including plans ended at first review)

On the 31 March 2014 there were 16 children and young people subject of a child protection plan of more than two years duration. This equates to 1.5% of the total number of child protection plans and represents an improvement in performance compared to 2012 – 13, at which time a rate of 2.4% was reported and compares favorably with performance reported in 2012 – 13 by the region (3.3%), statistical neighbors (2.2%) and the England average (3.2%).

Robust review arrangements are in place to prevent drift of the child protection plan. These arrangements have been strengthened by the development this year of a safeguarding problem resolution protocol to enable IROs to issue 'starred recommendations' (as already established in respect of looked after children) to ensure appropriate safeguarding plans are agreed and implemented. Preventing drift of child protection plans does not in itself ensure positive outcomes for children and young people and therefore performance should be judged alongside positive performance in respect of the low rates of children and young people who become subject of a child protection plan for a second or subsequent time, as this underlines that decisions to cease plans are appropriate and do not lead to high levels of further periods of statutory involvement.

Between April and November 2013, 119 children and young people subject of child protection plans had those plans ended at the first review. Extrapolated across a full year this would equate to 178 children/young people. 54 of the 119 children were looked after at the point the child protection plan ended and so were subject to independent review within that mechanism. The remaining 65 children were no longer judged to be at risk of significant harm or in need of safeguarding through a child protection plan. A small number of these children will have transferred into Lancashire whilst subject of a child protection plan and so were subject of a longer term child protection plan. The above represents significantly improved performance from that reported in 2012 - 13, wherein 390 children ceased to be subject of a child protection plan at the first review conference.

6.2.4 Re-Registrations: Percentage of Children who become subject of a Child Protection Plan at anytime during the year who had previously been subject of a Child Protection Plan regardless of how long ago (NI 65)

	2008/9	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14
Lancashire (internal data)	12.6%	13.3%	13.7%	10.8%	12.3%	12.6%
SN's	13.0%	15.0%	12.5%	15.6%	15.2%	N/A
England - National	13.5%	13.4%	13.3%	13.8%		

Average					14.9%	N/A
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The above table shows continuing good performance in respect of re-registration rates and evidences that decision making in respect of ceasing plans is robust, that thresholds to respond to further emerging concerns are applied appropriately and that children and young people in need of protection in Lancashire receive effective help and support.

6.2.5 Dual Status of Looked After Children and Children subject of a Child Protection Plan

At the time of writing there are 39 children and young people in Lancashire who are both looked after and subject of a child protection plan, a reduction from the figure of 49 children in March 2013. This demonstrates that dual planning systems are being brought under a single process in the vast majority of cases. Whilst some children and young people will appropriately be reviewed within both systems for a short period of time (for example, pending implementation of reunification plans and whilst awaiting the outcome of court processes), every effort is made to consolidate planning and reviews. Further guidance will be issued to IROs to inform judgments in relation to the issue of dual status to mitigate against any duplication.

7. Quality Assurance

7.1 Themes arising from IRO Quality Assurance

The scope for quality assurance by IROs covers the full range of services in place for every looked after child and is not restricted to Children's Social Care. The following themes have emerged from IRO case file audits over the last twelve months:

Strengths:

- Allocation of work within timescales is 100%.
- Recording in respect of information central to the child's file was strong. (GP, school, and associates).
- Parental involvement is evidenced as strong in assessment work and child protection conferences.

- Participation of looked after children in their review is strong and professionals are creative in the means by which participation is achieved. The voice of the child is also evident within their looked after reviews.
- Multi agency working is good; risk factors and their root causes are identified and are well understood.
- Decision making was appropriate in respect of the risks identified and was evidenced in the majority of cases audited. Where required, there was appropriate challenge to reduce the child's exposure to risk and the child was safeguarded from any immediate risk in 100% of the cases audited, with good clarity on further actions required and timescales.
- There was clarity in how the plan would make a positive difference to the child in the majority of the cases audited. There was also evidence of clear success criteria against which progress could be measured.

Areas for Improvement:

- Sharing of information prior to initial and review child protection conferences, and CLA reviews is at times poor. The implementation of the new LCS IT system should improve the provision of information to parents and other agencies and the introduction by the LSCB of standardised agency report templates for child protection conferences will improve the quality of reports. Furthermore, the introduction of a document portal should improve the timeliness and efficiency of information sharing between professionals in advance of child protection conferences.
- The attendance of children and young people at child protection conferences is sporadic.
- There was insufficient evidence of the voice of the child in assessments.
- The young person being seen on their own by their IRO should happen before each meeting. This does not always happen. This is prevented by capacity issues.
- Core groups and statutory visits are not always compliant with statutory timescales.
- Up to date health assessments and personal education plans were not always evident on the case record.

- Where the plan was not progressing, escalation and resolutions were not always in place.
- Knowledge of the complaints process is not universal.

The breakdown of challenges made by the IROs is detailed in section 5.4 of this report.

7.2 Attendance at Child Protection Conferences

Since January 2014 the IRO and Minute Taking Service have developed a process to capture data in respect of attendance at initial and review child protection conferences by agencies, parents and children and young people. The themes emerging are as follows:

- Attendance at child protection conferences by statutory agencies (Health, Education (including Early Years) and Police (in respect of Initial Child Protection Conferences) is good;
- Attendance by non-statutory agencies that nevertheless play a key role in supporting many families is less positive. Attendance at child protection conferences (Jan – March 2014) was as follows:
 - Initial child protection conferences: substance misuse service: 9%, Probation: 10%, domestic abuse service: 4%.
 - Review child protection conferences: substance misuse service: 7%, Probation: 10%, domestic abuse service: 2%.
- The data captures overall attendance and so does not seek a judgement from the IRO as to which agencies should have been invited/present at individual meetings. Nonetheless given the profile of difficulties experienced by children and young people subject of child protection plans, it suggests that a greater level of sign up from some agencies would strengthen the support provided to children and families as part of the child protection plan. The underlying causal factors are likely to be complex and multi-factorial and so this issue requires further targeted actions across agencies to address barriers to participation.
- Attendance by parents at child protection conferences is good, with low single figures of both initial and review conferences where parents did not attend.

This reflects the level of importance attached to parental participation and the efforts made across agencies to support parental engagement in child protection meetings.

- Not surprisingly direct attendance by children or young people is low, with single figures of attendance reported. In acknowledgment of this IROs are asked to report on whether the conference was able to directly receive the views of the child via other means, for example, via an advocate, professional attendee or written communication. Where the voice of the child isn't explicit, the IRO makes it a requirement that the views of the child are sought as part of the child protection plan. Feedback for the period from January to March 2014 suggests that in approximately two thirds of cases the conference directly received the 'voice of the child' and that in four fifths of cases the child protection plan contained specific actions to seek the 'voice of the child'. This suggests that whilst an explicit focus on the voice of the child has prompted greater inclusion of the child's perspective within child protection meetings, further work is required to ensure this is embedded consistently across all areas of practice. IROs chairing child protection conferences are well placed to drive improved practice in this area and this will remain a key priority for the team. To strengthen practice in relation to participation, members of the IRO team worked with the Children in Care Council and two student social workers to develop a participation tool-kit, creating a resource pack of materials for use by front-line practitioners to facilitate direct work with children and young people, seeking their wishes and feelings. Feedback from practitioners regarding the toolkit has been very positive.

7.3 Themes arising from Parent / Carer Questionnaires

One of the priority areas for development identified within the 2012-13 IRO annual report was to review and refine the process for seeking service user feedback from families involved in child protection conferences to improve the level and quality of feedback and to enable this feedback to inform service development.

In response to this the feedback forms were reviewed and updated to make them more accessible and user friendly, enabling parents / carers to feed back what was important to them. The revised forms were launched in January 2014 and IROs are

encouraging their completion. This has resulted in a 64% increase in the rate of returns, as well as enhanced qualitative and quantitative information. (In 2012 – 13: 88 responses received. In 2013 – 14, this had increased to 144).

7.3.1 Feedback from Initial Child Protection Conferences

94% of parents/carers felt that the reason why there are concerns for the safety and wellbeing of their child and why a child protection conference had been held were explained. However, further comments were made regarding opinions not being listened to and valued as part of the decision to go to conference.

86% of parents/carers felt they had an opportunity to express their views prior to the conference in respect of the concerns; however, this wasn't consistent with all professionals. Comments were made about how some opinions weren't taken seriously or were painted negatively. 79% of parents/carers felt able to share their views/discuss information during the conference, although several of the remaining 21% stated that they 'didn't see the point' in contributing their views.

A high percentage (97%) of parents/carers stated that they were informed of the purpose of the conference and who would be attending. Some parents/carers felt they didn't know half the professionals in attendance, with one parent stating an ex abusive partner was in attendance without her knowledge.

Up to December 2013, only 59% of parents/carers who responded to this question received copies of the reports from professionals 24 hours in advance of the conference, with the majority stating they had only received the report the day of the meeting. However, from January 2014 the number had dropped to only 50% of parents/carers. This coincides with the implementation of the LCS IT recording system for the electronic social care record. Data migration and the challenges of adjusting to a new IT system had a significant impact on recording practice, although some improvement is being seen as staff become accustomed to the changes. Furthermore, the recent additional investment in social work posts will increase capacity of front-line practitioners and will help to address this issue. However, the feedback from parents/carers isn't specific to Children's Social Care, but relates to all professionals attending child protection conferences. To address this issue requires a commitment from the multi-agency partnership and remains a priority for 2014 – 15. The

introduction of the document portal for will require the timely completion of reports by all professionals and should help to address this issue.

92% of parents/carers stated they met the chairperson before the conference who explained their role and the way in which the meeting would operate. The feedback received was very positive. Comments included 'the chair was excellent', 'she was very nice and helpful' and 'I was impressed with the IRO'.

An area for development identified in 2012 -13 was the low percentage of parents/carers who had the opportunity to speak to an IRO after the conference. This year's feedback shows there has been a slight improvement, increasing from 69% to 72%, however this remains an area for development.

Whilst a small number of families described the child protection process as stressful and traumatic, it was also described as a 'wake-up call'. In the feedback the chairperson was also congratulated for being helpful and professional. Other responses received suggested that for some the conference wasn't as daunting as they first expected it to be. Overall the majority of respondents were happy with how the conference was managed and thought that the chairperson was helpful and fair, even if the outcome wasn't what they wanted or hoped for.

Feedback was also received that professionals concentrated on past life choices which impacted greatly on current decisions, even though improvements were made through the use of courses and support. Feedback from some parents highlighted that closer dialogue with families as to the scheduling of child protection conferences is needed, as in some cases parents reported that they experienced difficulties arranging care for their children or were unable to participate in important religious or cultural events as a result of attending a conference.

Responses to the question – *'what could have been done differently?'* highlighted the following:

- Ensure that families have access to appropriate childcare arrangements / support to enable their participation at child protection conferences:

Social workers are asked to provide details as to their and the families availability to attend an initial child protection conference via a conference

request form. Adjournment of conferences due to an inability on the part of parents to secure childcare is very rare; however, pressures on social worker / IRO time and access to appropriate venues can constrain the available slots to convene the conference within the required timescale. Such issues are fed back on an individual basis and if necessary via District CSC / IRO cluster meetings.

- Ensure that families understand which professionals are in attendance and why:

Whilst many professionals in attendance will be well known to the family, there will by necessity be certain attendees who are there by virtue of a statutory role (for example, the Police Safeguarding Officer or Health Safeguarding Lead) and do not have direct knowledge of the family. Whilst all professionals will introduce themselves at the start of conferences and name plates are used, this feedback suggests that their remit to attend is not always understood by parents/carers. This issue has been fed back to the conference chairs, to ensure they explain the role and remit of all professionals in attendance during the preparation for the conference.

- Families struggle to understand the relevance of historical information being shared within the conference and this being considered in relation to decision making:

In March 2014 the Lancashire Safeguarding Children Board adopted standardised templates for agency reports to initial child protection conferences. This template directs a greater focus on an analysis of risks and strengths, including a chronology of significant events. Relevant historical concerns are therefore summarised in line with the revised Public Law outline reporting requirements.

7.3.2 Feedback from Review Child Protection Conferences

89% of parents/carers reported that they had attended the monthly core group meetings held in respect of their child. Whilst this signifies a good level of participation, this is slightly less than in the previous year and some of the remaining 11% reported not being informed about core group meetings or last minute changes/cancellations.

Positively, 85% of respondents felt they could share their views and opinions within the core group and felt they were listened to appropriately by professionals.

The majority of respondents appreciated the support and advice they were offered in respect of their children; however, a minority thought that professionals were not listening and showing respect for their views and opinions and that social workers should be more open.

A common theme arising from both initial and review child protection conferences is the sharing of reports within the required timescales. Only 68% of parents/carers reported receiving professionals reports 48 hours in advance of the review conference. Most respondents received the reports either on the day of the conference or the preceding evening.

91% of parents/carers met the IRO before the conference began who explained their role and how the meeting would operate. The IRO role was valued by parents who made comments including, 'nice, lovely and helpful' and 'amazing, professional and neutral'. One example of negativity towards the IRO is regarding a comment made about feeling 'continuously watched by the IRO' and that they made them feel like a 'bad parent'. Although 82% of parents reported they were given an opportunity to have a discussion with the IRO at the end of the meeting, for some of the remaining 18% this was not available due to the IRO having to leave the meeting. Whilst to some extent this may reflect the very busy workloads of IROs in Lancashire, this is important feedback for the team and IROs should wherever possible provide parents with this opportunity.

92% of parents/carers felt that they were able to share their views and discuss information in the child protection conference, with many expressing that they were grateful for the help and support they received and felt listened to. Comments from the remaining 8% indicated that they felt unsupported and that it was not worth sharing their views. A significant majority of comments highlighted that although it was a daunting experience, due to the 'fear of the unknown' and not knowing what to expect, they 'feel a better person, stronger and a lot happier' due to the support put in place via the child protection plan. It is evident that parents and carers' appreciate the role of the IRO as an independent person, who is there to manage the conference and ensure everyone's views and opinions are listened to.

7.4 Problem Resolution Processes

7.4.1 Use of the Problem Resolution Process for Looked After Children

The problem resolution process is well established within Lancashire and is well used by IROs to ensure positive outcomes for looked after children. The NCB Research, 'The Role of IROs in England', (2014) highlights the importance of effective dispute resolution procedures as part of the range of interventions deployed by IROs, from advice/persuasion/influence at one end, to formal challenge at the other.

In 2012/13 the IRO team made 24 starred recommendations in respect of looked after children. In 2013/14 this had increased by nearly 100%, to 47 starred recommendations. This perhaps reflects the increasing confidence of IROs in challenging practice and recognition of their professional responsibility and accountability as detailed in the IRO Handbook.

Starred recommendations by district: 2010/11 2011/12 2012/13 2013/14

LANCASTER DISTRICT	4	2	3	5
FYLDE & WYRE DISTRICT	0	1	1	4
PRESTON DISTRICT	4	2	0	2
CHORLEY & SOUTH RIBBLE DISTRICT	2	7	6	11
WEST LANCASHIRE DISTRICT	1	2	1	
HYNDBURN & RIBBLE VALLEY DISTRICT	1	4	1	3
PENDLE DISTRICT	2	1	0	6
BURNLEY DISTRICT	4	4	0	4
ROSSENDALE DISTRICT	2	2	1	
SPECIALIST SERVICES (located outside of districts)	N/A	N/A	10	12

TOTAL	20	25	23	47
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Of the 47 starred recommendations made, one remains outstanding with the remainder resolved as follows: Stage Two: 28, Stage Three: 8, Stage Four: 7, Stage Five: 3

The one outstanding starred recommendation from 2013/14 relates to educational provision to a looked after child which required a change of placement. The change in placement has been undertaken. However, the IRO is holding the starred recommendation open until they have been able to assure themselves that the educational provision now offered meets the child's needs.

Of those cases resolved, 26 were resolved within the timescale set by the IRO, whilst 18 were resolved to the satisfaction of the IRO but outside of the proposed timescale. During the last year one of the Quality and Review Managers has taken the lead for the monthly monitoring of starred recommendations, ensuring more robust oversight and tracking of cases. In respect of those recommendations from 2012-13 that were resolved outside of the timescale proposed by the IRO a number of factors are evident:

- A number of starred recommendations related to a lack of capacity to undertake life story work for adopted children and resolution was protracted.
- A number of starred recommendations involve the commitment of additional resources and were not resolved within the original timescale proposed by the IRO.
- A number of starred recommendations related to actions required by agencies other than Children's Social Care and response times were variable.

The monitoring of starred recommendations is ensuring that any delay in response that is inconsistent with the welfare of the child is appropriately escalated.

The starred recommendations made related to a wide range of issues in respect of care planning, the provision of support (including support from agencies other than Lancashire County Council), and compliance with reports for CLA reviews. The largest single strand of starred recommendations (nine) was triggered by a short

period where a small number of looked after children in one district did not have access to a named social worker. This was successfully resolved following the intervention of senior managers and all children were allocated a social worker.

Case Example 1

Child A is a looked after child whose parents have sadly died. The IRO was concerned that timely permanence planning was required to secure a permanent placement for Child A. There was also no one able to exercise parental responsibility for this child. The IRO issued a starred recommendation in respect of legal consultation within a defined timescale and this resulted in the local authority making an application to court for a Care Order.

Case Example 2

Child 2 is a looked after child for whom the local authority proposed a placement move from an external placement to an in-house placement provided by the County Council. The young person had commenced introductions to the new placement and was unhappy about the move. The IRO supported the young person, using their powers under section 3.79 of the IRO Handbook (3.57 of Care Planning Regulations) to freeze the placement pending further consideration of the young person's views. This resulted in a decision that the young person would remain in their existing placement.

Case Example 3

Child 3 is a looked after child who has achieved excellent academic performance and has always aspired to study at University. The IRO became aware that Child 3 required clarity as to the support arrangements that would be available for them to attend university and directed review recommendations to this end. At that time the support package was subject to review under the 'staying put' arrangements and Child 3 felt disadvantaged by the proposed package. The IRO supported Child 3 in challenging the proposed support offer and they were ultimately successful, resulting in an improved offer to Child 3, as well as other young people in the same position.

7.5 Internal Audit

Internal Audit completed a review of progress within the IRO team in February 2014. Action has been taken to address the recommendations as follows:

- Robust systems are in place for monitoring starred recommendations.
- The allocation of work to the IROs now takes place on a locality foot-print to ensure smarter ways of working.
- Appropriate management controls are in place within the team.
- The merger of the safeguarding and looked after children IRO teams ensures continuity of IRO for the child throughout their journey of statutory involvement.

- A centralised booking service has been introduced which has improved the efficiency of the administrative arrangements in respect of child protection conferences.
- Following implementation of a new IT solution for the electronic children's social care record, the notification process when a looked after child changes placement has been streamlined.
- The IRO team has participated in a review of the Quality Assurance Framework and revisions have been made to the case file audit tool to ensure consistency of audits. Compliance with case file auditing requirements is a priority and quarterly reporting arrangements are in place to monitor this.
- Increased demand on Children's Social Care and the IRO team following a rise in the number of looked after children and children subject to a child protection plan, continues to have an impact in some areas in meeting timescales. The timely sharing of reports with family members and the distribution of review documentation have been identified as areas requiring improvement. This is monitored by managers. A recent investment in social work posts and an additional IRO post will assist in addressing both issues.

8. Evidence of Good Practice

8.1 IRO intervention outside of formal Problem Resolution Processes

The IRO can also use their experience and influence to promote positive outcomes for children and young people without recourse to formal problem resolution procedures. This can be illustrated in the following examples:

Case Example 1

Child 4 is a looked after child who, as a non-UK national faced uncertainty regarding their continued residence in the UK. The IRO ensured through specific review recommendations and regular oversight of the case, that the young person had access to advocacy and legal advice to clarify their leave to remain in the UK.

Case Example 2

Child 5 is a looked after child who sought access to independent advocacy and legal advice in respect of bringing a possible human rights claim related to protection from abuse. The IRO ensured that the young person was able to access legal advice and therefore fully explore their legal position in respect of any human rights breach.

Case Example 3

The IRO reviewed a report for a review child protection conference, with an accompanying recommendation that the child protection plan be ceased. The IRO had concerns that the child protection plan had not been fully implemented and that further investigation of vulnerability factors within the family was required. The IRO was mindful that the social worker was newly allocated to the family and the primary carer for the children could be challenging and confrontational towards professionals. The IRO discussed the report and its recommendation with the social worker and manager who agreed that further work was needed to ensure that all areas of risk and vulnerability had been addressed. The review conference endorsed this view and was able to develop a detailed plan to reflect these issues.

Case Example 4

This case highlights the important contribution to safeguarding work that was undertaken by an IRO outside of their chairperson role in formal meetings. In this case there was disagreement between Children's Social Care and other agencies as to the need for an initial child protection conference, as opposed to continuing support under a child in need plan. The IRO had discussions across agencies leading to the development and review of detailed chronologies to inform decision making. This led to an agreement that an initial conference would be convened, resulting in the development of a child protection plan, which by the first review was achieving a

greater commitment from the parents and importantly improvements in the care afforded to the children.

8.2 Creative Methods to Ensure Participation by Children and Young People

IROs in Lancashire continue to promote innovative ways of promoting the participation of children and young people in their looked after children review. Child S is an 11 year old looked after child who had not previously directly participated in her reviews. She had recently gained access to an iPad and so with the encouragement of the IRO was able to produce her own report for the review in a photo library/booklet (headed – 'My Report'). This included photographs of her activities and achievements, lists of her likes and dislikes and identifying those people she felt listened to her when she had a worry. This represents creative practice in facilitating the participation of a child who would not have been able to make such a contribution verbally.

8.3 Development of a Safeguarding Problem Resolution Process

It is recognised that effective challenge by IROs requires a clearly defined system by which concerns are escalated and resolved in order to promote good outcomes for children and young people and improve wider standards of practice. Following a serious case review recommendation, a Safeguarding Problem Resolution protocol has been developed following the principles of the established model for looked after children. Given the multi-agency focus of interventions to safeguard and protect children and young people who are subject of child protection plans, the protocol was approved by the LSCB and became operational in February 2014. It enables IROs to hold the multi-agency partnership to account:

- Where there is concern that the child protection plan developed does not adequately safeguard the child;
- Where there are concerns that the agreed child protection plan has either not been implemented or has been progressed in a manner outside of that agreed at the conference and this results in a child/young person being at increased risk of significant harm.

Thus far recommendations have been issued in respect of 8 children in 4 families. This has included issues in respect of the recording of child protection visits and core

groups and delay in the progression of the child protection plan, including the initiation of legal proceedings.

9. Service Development

Update on Service Priorities from 2012-13:

9.1 Embed New Structure

The IRO team restructured in January 2013, bringing together IROs for both looked after children and children subject to a child protection plan. All IROs have had the opportunity, within their role or as part of their induction to shadow IRO colleagues who have greater experience in different aspects of the journey of the child through statutory interventions and looked after children status. Given the size of Lancashire the IRO team is not co-located and IROs reported that they didn't have the opportunity to discuss and reflect with colleagues on difficult cases and challenges. In response to this a system of monthly meetings (separate to team business meetings) has been introduced to create opportunities for reflective practice. IROs are also encouraged to act as 'buddies' for their IRO colleagues to further support their professional development. An IRO team training plan is in place and as part of this resulted in specialist training being commissioned for IROs in respect of chairing strategy meetings to address concerns of fabricated/induced illness and chairing complex meetings. In addition IROs regularly attend relevant multi-agency training delivered by the LSCB. The IRO team is also represented on the Directorate Workforce Development Group, chaired by the Principal Social Worker.

9.2 Develop a Quarterly Quality Assurance Report

A quarterly quality assurance report has been developed to capture themes from case file audits completed within the IRO team, performance information, issues arising through the problem resolution process and learning from Serious Case Reviews. The report will provide a useful reporting and feedback mechanism to district teams.

9.3 Participation in NCB Research in relation to the role of the IRO

The National Children's Bureau (NCB) published research in relation to the role of IROs ('The Role of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) in England', March 2014). The report highlights the enhanced role of IROs and the challenges / debates in

respect of the future of this service. IROs are identified as having an important role in the following areas:

- Overseeing the care plans of individual children and using a variety of tactics from persuasion to overt challenge to make sure a child's needs are met;
- Acting as a resource for colleagues, as experienced social workers with specialist expertise in the needs of looked after children;
- Identifying systemic or resource deficiencies in the service to looked after children and lobbying for improvements;
- Working to proactively develop the service to looked after children through innovation.

The report further highlights that for the IRO role to be effective and to be properly utilised for the benefit of looked after children, it requires a range of factors to be addressed within and beyond the IRO team. The recommendations of this report and the Ofsted report, 'Independent reviewing officers: taking up the challenge?' (2013) are reflected in the service priorities for 2014-15 (see section 9 of this report).

9.4 Reduce Delay in Care Proceedings

The Family Justice Review and revised Public Law Outline is now fully operational. As outlined in section 4.2, IROs are successfully contributing to the oversight of cases where child protection plans are unresolved beyond 12 months duration. IROs are working closely with Family Court Advisers from Cafcass where necessary to ensure that local authority assessment and planning is robust and achieved within the court timescales.

9.5 Improve Service User feedback

As highlighted in section 5.2 the process by which we seek feedback from parents/carers who attend child protection conferences has been reviewed and strengthened, resulting in a greater level of feedback and a better balance of qualitative and quantitative information. The feedback is shared with IROs and social work teams via quarterly CSC District / IRO cluster meetings to drive practice improvement.

9.6 Access to Independent Legal Advice

The IRO Handbook requires that IROs have access to independent legal advice. This is currently spot purchased from a private law firm. Attempts to develop reciprocal arrangements with another local authority have been unsuccessful. Further discussions are taking place with Legal Services to explore alternative arrangements.

10. Challenges

10.1 Implementation of new Electronic Children's Social Care Record (LCS)

In February 2014 Lancashire Children's Social Care implemented a new ICT system for the electronic children's social care record. Whilst this provides significant enhancements to the previous system, it has been a major transition and continues to require extensive additional work to ensure that cases are being progressed in a timely and accurate manner. In the short term this has impaired the availability and accuracy of management information in respect of child protection and looked after children performance.

In addition the new LCS system brings into the electronic process tasks that were previously completed outside of it, including invites for meetings, minutes and process for the distribution of records in respect of child protection conferences and looked after children reviews. Delays have occurred in the distribution of documentation which is being addressed. The responsibility for conference invites has been removed from social workers and is now an administrative task. The administrative functions in respect of conferences are being centralised to streamline processes and improve efficiency. The timeliness of the distribution of conference decision sheets and minutes is also being monitored by Case Support, the Minute Taking and Transcription Service and the IRO team pending the transition to the new administrative team.

10.2 Impact of high caseloads across the IRO Service

As already highlighted caseloads within the IRO team average 117 children per full-time equivalent IRO, against a recommended level of 50-70 children. Despite additional investment in IRO posts over the last two years, the increase in service demand has meant that the anticipated reduction in IRO caseloads has not been achieved. IRO capacity therefore remains a significant challenge. This has impacted

on some aspects of their quality assurance role. For example, in undertaking mid-point review checks in all cases to monitor the progression of review recommendations in between statutory review meetings. IROs have also been unable to meet case file audit targets as required within the Directorate's Quality Assurance Framework and timescales for the distribution of review reports are not always met. The latter is being investigated further in order to assess performance in this area. As a consequence IROs in Lancashire do not undertake additional tasks as highlighted in the NCB research. For example, regulatory visits to children's home or cover for the LADO function. However, they are responsible for chairing child protection conferences and a range of strategy meetings. Whilst outside of the statutory 'IRO' role this is deemed to be good practice and ensures consistency of IRO throughout the child's journey. DLT has recently approved the creation of an additional full-time IRO post which will take the team to 27 FTE IROs. This will increase capacity within the team. However, IRO caseloads will remain above the recommended level in statutory guidance.

11. Priorities for 2014-15

The importance of the IRO role has been highlighted throughout this report and in national policy and research. A bench-marking exercise has been completed as a self-assessment against the requirements in both the NCB research findings and the Ofsted report, 'Independent reviewing officers: taking up the challenge?' (2013). This identified strengths and areas for further development as follows:

Strengths:

- As highlighted in this report there is strong evidence of the independent challenge provided by IROs, using both formal and informal resolution approaches.
- The IRO team is compliant with the requirement to produce an annual report. The IRO annual report was highlighted as an example of good practice in the Safeguarding/CLA inspection in 2012. The report is presented to the Directorate Leadership Team, the Corporate Parenting Board and the LSCB Executive.

- IROs within the team are appropriately skilled and experienced. The IRO team is represented on the Directorate Workforce Development Group chaired by the Principal Social Worker, to ensure that IRO training and development needs are reflected in the agreed training priorities. Excellent training opportunities are afforded to IROs. This includes training commissioned specifically for the team, as well as wider Directorate and LSCB training. IROs have also attended lectures delivered by the University of Central Lancashire. Staff turnover within the team has reduced and those staff that left the service, have done so for specific reasons. E.g. for promotion or to work nearer to home.
- The IRO team contributes to policy and practice improvement. For example, the development of a participation toolkit and involvement in the revisions to the missing children protocol. However, given IRO capacity issues, this work is often undertaken by the managers of the team.
- The IRO team has forged strong links with the Corporate Parenting Board and is represented on the board by one of the Quality & Review Managers. The manager is proactive in following up any issues raised by board members, including the young people who attend. The IRO Annual Report is shared with the young people and board as a whole. Last year this was achieved using a 'who wants to be a millionaire' quiz which was very well received.

Areas for Further Development:

- To continue to monitor IRO workloads and the impact on the ability to fulfill their wider monitoring and quality assurance remit: A review should be undertaken of the additional meetings chaired by IROs (in relation to missing children and a range of strategy meetings) and consideration given to other options for the completion of this work. The recent approval of an additional IRO post will increase capacity. However, IRO caseloads will remain higher than the level recommended in statutory guidance. This impacts on some aspects of their quality assurance role.
- To strengthen the arrangements for consultation and communication between looked after children and their IRO outside of formal reviews: This will be progressed through the introduction of new leaflets sent to children who

become looked after explaining the role of their IRO and via IROs contacting children directly to establish their chosen method of communication. It is recommended that IROs be provided with iPhones (rather than Blackberries) to support their communication with children and young people, enabling the use of FaceTime.

- To facilitate IROs having a 'seat at the top table' through direct feedback to senior managers in respect of practice issues and the fulfillment of the corporate parenting function: This will be progressed through bi-annual meetings attended by IROs, their managers and senior managers from Children's Social Care to address issues arising from the CSC District / IRO cluster meetings and IRO quarterly quality assurance reports.
- To enhance performance management and quality assurance activity within the team: IROs and managers of the team are required to undertake case file audits. However, a priority in 2014 – 15 is to ensure compliance with the auditing requirements specified in the Quality Assurance Framework. The quality of practice is also assessed by managers within the service undertaking practice observations of IROs, however in 2014-15, the number of practice observations undertaken will be increased. The themes arising from this activity will be used to shape service improvements. Good practice guidance is to be developed across key areas of IRO practice. An agency feedback mechanism will also be introduced.
- To ensure dispute resolution processes are working effectively: Whilst problem resolution procedures are well embedded, their application in practice will continue to be monitored to ensure this is both consistent and robust in respect of both looked after children and children subject to a child protection plan: Systems are in place to monitor the use of formal problem resolution procedures across the IRO team.
- IROs must have access to independent legal advice: Legal advice for IROs is currently spot purchased from a private law firm. Further discussions are taking place with Legal Services to explore alternative arrangements.

12. Conclusion

The report highlights the progress made in promoting positive outcomes for children and young people since the merger of the safeguarding and looked after children IRO teams in January 2013. Whilst the team is now fully staffed, IRO capacity remains a significant challenge. However, the report demonstrates the ability of the team to drive good practice and challenge where this is necessary. The identified priorities for 2014 – 15 recognise the support required for IROs in further influencing service delivery and the quality of corporate parenting.

Paul McIntyre Quality & Review Manager
 Mark Hudson Quality & Review Manager
 Lesley Sheridan Quality & Review Manager
 Sally Allen Directorate Safeguarding Manager

June 2014

Appendix 1: Post-Qualifying Experience Table

The table below details the level of post qualifying experience and length of service as IRO managers and IROs in Lancashire:

IRO Managers

Name	Year of Qualification	Year began as an IRO	Year began as an IRO manager
Quality & Review Manager 1	1982	1999	2010
Quality & Review Manager 2	1999	2005-08	2013
Quality & Review Manager 3	2004	2010	2013

IROs

Name	Year of qualification	Year began as IRO

IRO 1	1985	1999
IRO 2	1989	1999
IRO 3	2003	2009
IRO 4	1993	2009
IRO 5	2003	2009
IRO 6	2005	2010
IRO 7	2007	2012
IRO 8	1988	2011
IRO 9	2000	2012
IRO 10	2001	2013
IRO 11	2006	2013
IRO 12	2006	2013
IRO 13	1995	2004
IRO 14	1995	2001
IRO 15	1996	2011
IRO 16	1982	2011
IRO 17	2000	2011
IRO 18	2004	2011
IRO 19	1988	2012
IRO 20	2007	2012
IRO 21	2006	2014
IRO 22	2004	2014
IRO 23	2008	2014
IRO 24	1979	2013
IRO 25	2000	2007
IRO 26	1999	2014
IRO 27 (temp)	1997	2013
Fostering IRO 1	1998	2013

