

Worcestershire's Independent Reviewing Officers' Annual Report 2016- 2017

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This report is presented to the Director of Children's Services, Lead Cabinet Member for Children and the Corporate Parenting Board.

This report is a public document.

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1. Purpose of Service and Legal Context

1.1 An annual report of the Independent Reviewing (IRO) Service for looked after children is required in accordance with the Children and Young Person's Act 2008 and subsequent statutory guidance published by the DFE in 2010 the Independent Reviewing Officers Handbook.

1.2 The appointment of an IRO for every looked after child is a legal requirement under section 118 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and subsequent Review of Children's Cases 2004. The role of the IRO was strengthened in the Children and Young Person's Act 2008 and Care Planning, Placement Regulations and Case Review 2010.

2. The statutory duties of the IRO are to:

- Monitor the local authority's performance 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.
- Perform any other function which is prescribed in regulations.

3. The Safeguarding and Quality Assurance (SQA) – including the professional profile of the unit

3.1 This report is concentrating on our Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO), as stated above, but it is useful to explain that the IRO's are part of the Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Unit.

3.2 The Independent Reviewing Officer service in Worcestershire sits within the Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Unit and is managed independently of children's social work line management and is, therefore, offering an appropriate level of independence that enables the service to effectively challenge plans, arrangements and the practice of the local authority.

3.3 Independent Reviewing Officers have no involvement in preparing a child's care plan, management of the case and/or allocation of resources to looked after children.

3.4 The SQA consists of our child protection coordinators and our independent reviewing officers (IRO). Within Worcestershire this role has been separated for several years.

3.5 The Local Authority Designated Officers (LADO) sit under the SQA, but are based at the Family Front Door.

3.6 The Worcester Children's Safeguarding Board Business Unit (WSCB) is overseen by the SQA.

4. Management of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance (SQA)

4.1 After a period of instability with a number of interim Group Managers; the SQA now has a permanent management team with Andrew Tombs, Group Manager and Sally Branchflower, IRO Practice Manager, joining the service in March 2017.

4.2 Mr Tombs (Group Manager)

I am the senior manager for Safeguarding and Quality Assurance and have overall responsibility for this part of the service. I directly supervise the IRO Practice Manager, Business Manager for the Worcestershire Safeguarding Children's Board (WSCB), the Child Protection Coordinators, and the Local Authority Designated Officers (LADO).

4.3 Mrs Branchflower (Practice Manager)

Mrs Branchflower provides the day to day management of the Independent Reviewing Officers.

4.4 Mrs Branchflower represents Worcestershire at the Regional IRO Managers Network; this is a useful forum that shares good practice. In the past two years we have not been well represented at this Network.

4.5 Mrs Branchflower is now meeting with the Head of Service for CAFCASS for the Hereford and Worcestershire quarterly.

5. The Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) staffing:

5.1 The IRO staffing assignment is 10 FTE; this consists of 8 full time and 3 part time staff. With the exception of one interim IRO, covering for long term sick leave, our IRO Team consists of all permanent members of staff. Our IRO team is currently all female, but we have appointed two men who are due to start in September 2017; once two of our current IRO's move to new jobs. The staffing team is stable with the majority of staff been in post for two years plus.

5.2 I have already had a capability discussion with one of our IRO's about poor performance and put in a plan of action. We have also ended contracts of poor performing interim IRO staff.

Caseloads

5.3 The Independent Reviewing Officers Handbook recommends that IRO should have a caseload of between (50) and (70). The average caseload for our IRO is currently (85-90) which is considered to be too high. In order to get our caseloads in line with this guidance we would need to increase our IRO staffing or reduce the number of our Looked After Children.

5.4 Our Looked after Children population has steadily increased by since April 2016 which has placed the IRO part of the service under strain. With the level of experience in this service we are managing with higher caseloads on a temporary basis. However, it is hoped that when the edge of care strategy is fully embedded the flow of children becoming looked after will slow down.

5.5 At this time, the admin worker distributes the record of discussion and recommendations on behalf of the service. We are struggling to get records of discussions distributed within timescales. A recent solution, however, that I have reached with the other group managers is for the locality teams' additional admin to undertake this task in order to create some capacity within the SQA admin to support the IRO more than we currently do.

6. Performance of Independent Reviewing Officers Team

6.1 We had recorded timeliness of Looked after Reviews once all the minutes and recommendations had been completed on FWI, which gives an inaccurate picture of the number of meeting held within timescales.

6.2 To reflect accuracy within this key performance indicator, we are now using the actual date of the review and whether the review is in timescale from the outcome form completed within 24 hours by the IRO. This approach will give us a more accurate picture of reviews undertaken in the next reporting period in July 2017.

	2014/15			2015/16			2016/17		
Month	No of Reviews	No of Reviews in Timescale	% of Reviews in Timescale	No of Reviews	No of Reviews in Timescale	% of Reviews in Timescale	No of Reviews	No of Reviews in Timescale	% of Reviews in Timescale
Apr	160	143	89.4%	124	118	95.2%	158	144	91.1%
May	174	147	84.5%	145	130	89.7%	198	190	96.0%
Jun	170	142	83.5%	148	136	91.9%	162	147	90.7%
Jul	149	129	86.6%	185	160	86.5%	169	165	97.6%
Aug	102	92	90.2%	101	82	81.2%	114	107	93.9%
Sep	169	146	86.4%	191	137	71.7%	152	135	88.8%
Oct	205	189	92.2%	151	138	91.4%	156	143	91.7%
Nov	175	157	89.7%	190	172	90.5%	191	163	85.3%
Dec	144	130	90.3%	153	135	88.2%	143	132	92.3%
Jan	139	123	88.5%	152	129	84.9%	169	144	85.2%
Feb	137	126	92.0%	153	141	92.2%	143	129	90.2%
Mar	187	176	94.1%	155	140	90.3%	120	104	86.7%
Whole Year	1911	1700	88.96%	1848	1618	87.6%	1875	1703	90.8%

7. Participation (PN codes)

7.1 The Department of Education (DFE) requires that we record and report on the levels and types of children's participation within looked after reviews. Our recording of participation has not been good enough; as you will see in the chart below.

Child Participation at LAC Reviews					
	No of Reviews for Children aged 4 and over	Reviews for Children aged 4 and over where Child Participated		Reviews for Children aged 4 and over where Child Attendance and Participation not recorded	
		No	%	No	%
2014/15	1,543	1,366	88.5%	57	3.7%
2015/16	1,463	987	67.5%	409	28.0%
2016/17	1,467	895	61.0%	542	36.9%

7.2 The recording of this information is now mandatory within FWI within the outcome form. The early indicators of this change that I introduced are encouraging for quarter 1 there has been a marked improvement with an increase from 61% participation 2016/2017 to 93% from April to July 2017.

We currently recording an improved attendance at looked after reviews at 40%.

8. Record of Looked After Reviews

8.1 The IRO should complete the record of discussion within 20 days, but this not been routinely done. Currently, we are not meeting this timescales, but we have a plan to improve our performance in this area.

8.2 We are exploring whether to introduce the 'Letter to the child' style of minutes; we will be consulting on this with our Child in Care Council. This approach has been adapted in other local authorities.

9. Dispute Resolution Process (DRP)

9.1 The revised DRP is an important part of our overarching quality assurance framework. The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations (2010) requires the Local Authority to have a 'Dispute Resolution Process' (DRP) to address any disagreements or concerns the

Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) has in relation to the Local Authority's care planning or practice for a looked after child.

9.2 We had not been consistently using one approach to escalating concerns about practice or care plans for past 12 months although concerns were being raised. From the beginning of June 2017, we have implemented a revised DRP process which is built within FWI.

9.3 The DRP data dashboard was completed on 10th July 2017, after a couple of weeks; it will be able to identify patterns around which workers and teams where there are repeated issues with notable delays or practice issues.

9.4 The DRP should ensure that issues are dealt with in a manner and timescale which limits any unintentional potential negative outcomes for the child or young person.

9.5 The IRO has a statutory responsibility to initiate the DRP where a proposed plan is considered inappropriate to meet the child's needs or where an issue of poor practice is identified. In these circumstances, the DRP provides the regulatory structure for the IRO's challenge to the local authority.

9.6 This challenge should be incremental up through the local authority management hierarchy, although every effort should be made to resolve the issue at each stage.

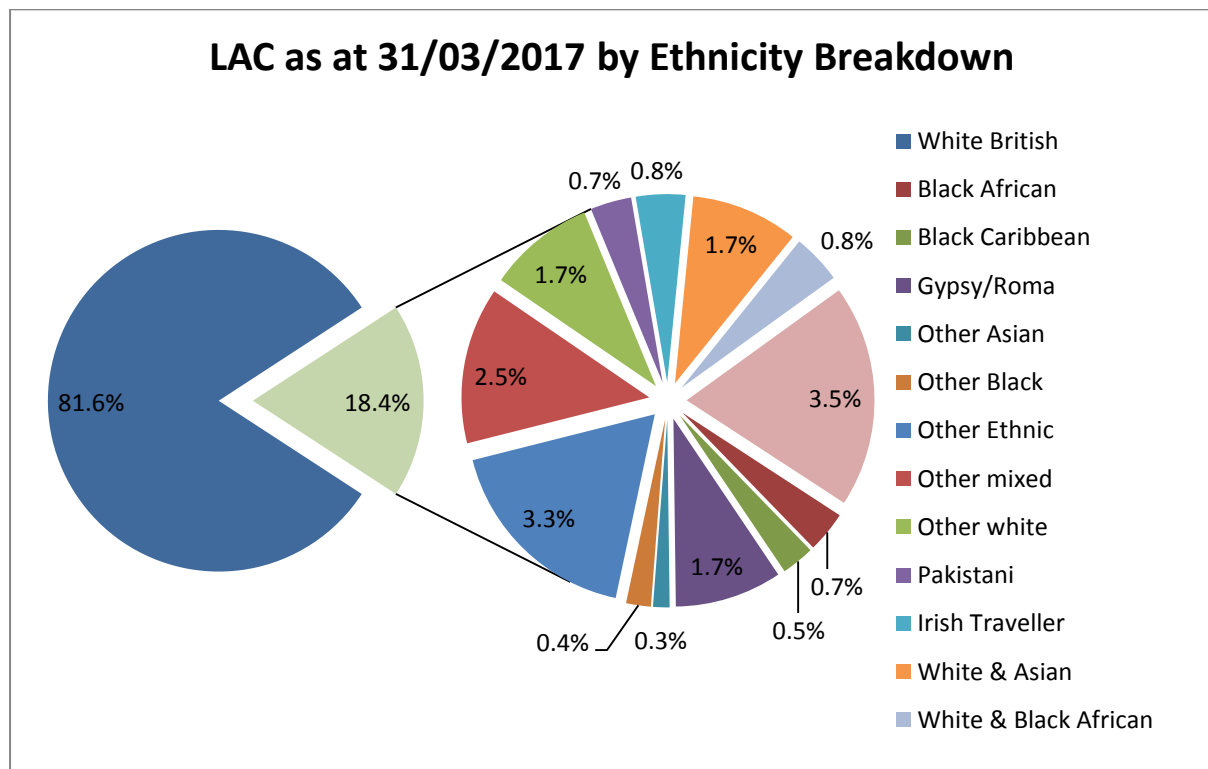
9.7 The IRO has the authority to raise serious unresolved issues outside of the local authority with CAFCASS.

10. Looked After Children cohort

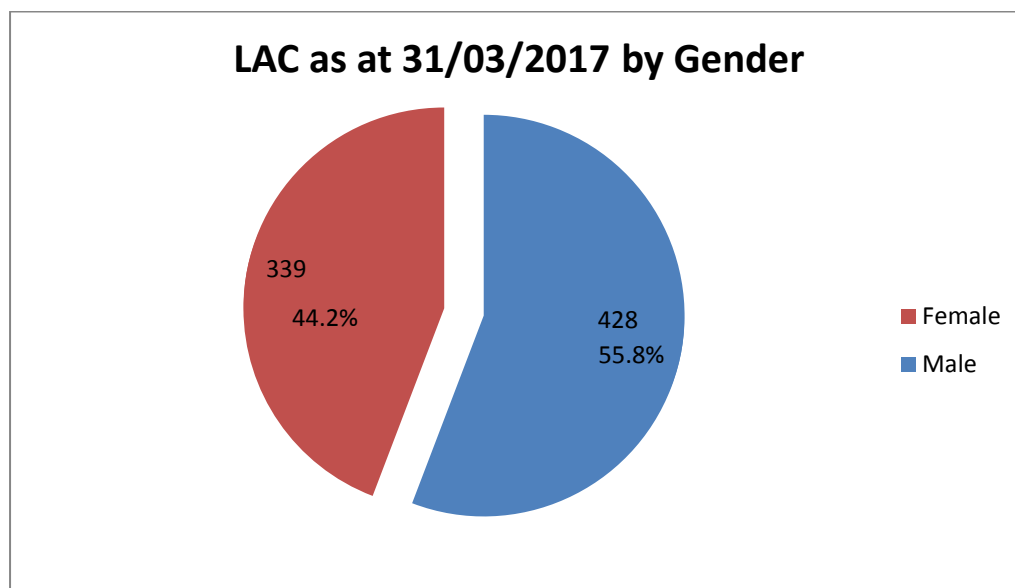
10.1 As at 31/03/2017, there were 767 children looked after by Worcestershire Children's Services; which is a **10.5% increase** on 694 as of 31/03/2016.

Demographics

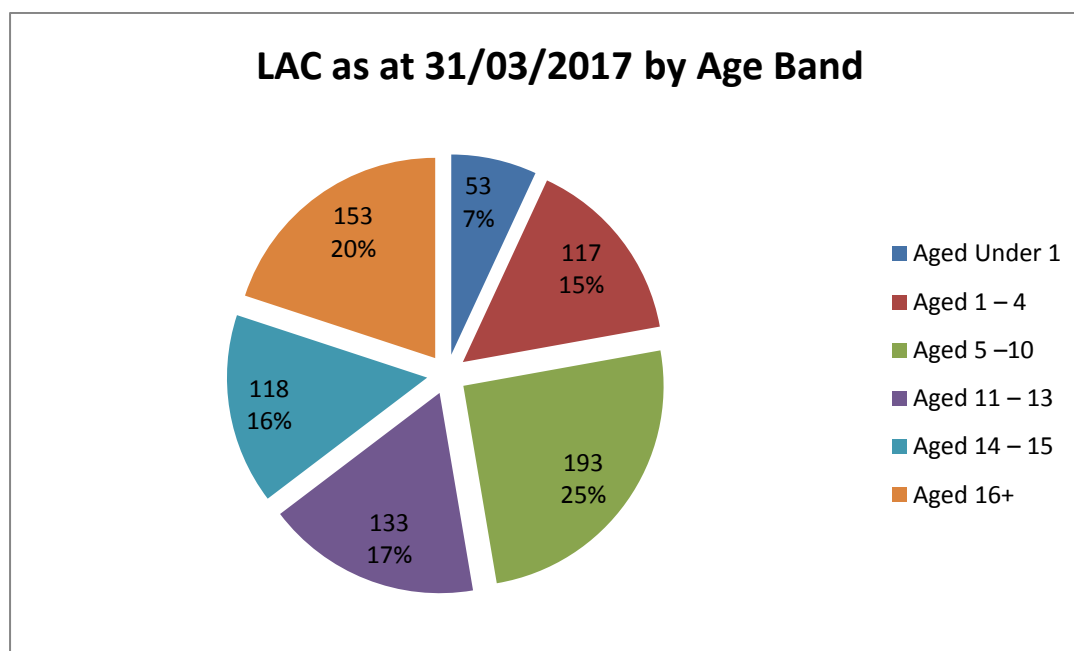
10.2 Breakdown of Looked After population by ethnicity



10.3 Breakdown of Looked After population by Gender



10.4 Breakdown of Looked After population by Age



10.5 The following charts give the breakdown by district and gender of where the children were residing before becoming looked after.

LAC as at 31/03/2017 by District and Gender

District	M	F	Total
Bromsgrove	44	27	71
Malvern Hills	55	35	90
Redditch	84	66	150
Worcester	83	84	167
Wychavon	49	35	84
Wyre Forest	76	75	151
Out of County / Not recorded / Unknown	37	17	54
Total	428	339	767

10.6 The following charts give the breakdown by district and age based where the children were residing before becoming looked after.

LAC as at 31/03/2017 by District and Age Band

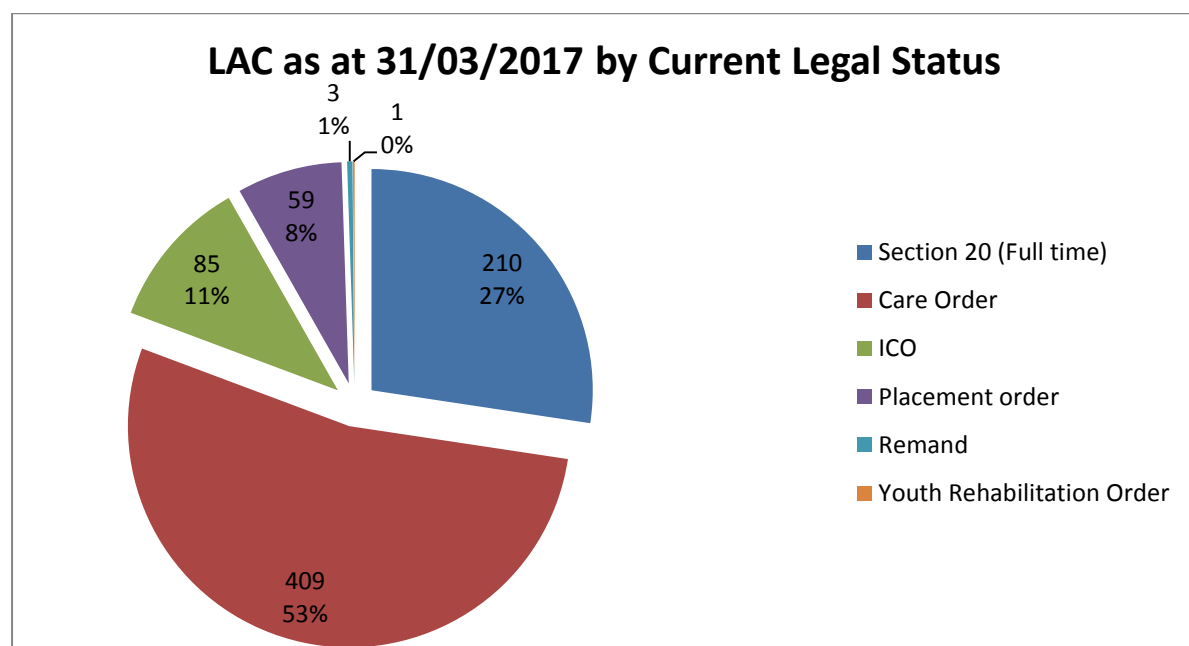
District	Aged Under 1	Aged 1 - 4	Aged 5 - 10	Aged 11 - 13	Aged 14 - 15	Aged 16+	Total
Bromsgrove	4	15	18	14	9	11	71
Malvern Hills	6	17	24	14	22	7	90
Redditch	6	27	40	22	22	33	150
Worcester	10	31	39	33	26	28	167
Wychavon	6	4	22	17	12	23	84
Wyre Forest	13	20	45	29	19	25	151
Out of County / Not recorded / Unknown	8	3	5	4	8	26	54
Total	53	117	193	133	118	153	767

10.7 The majority of the children that become looked after in 2016/2017 were previously on child protection plans 59%.

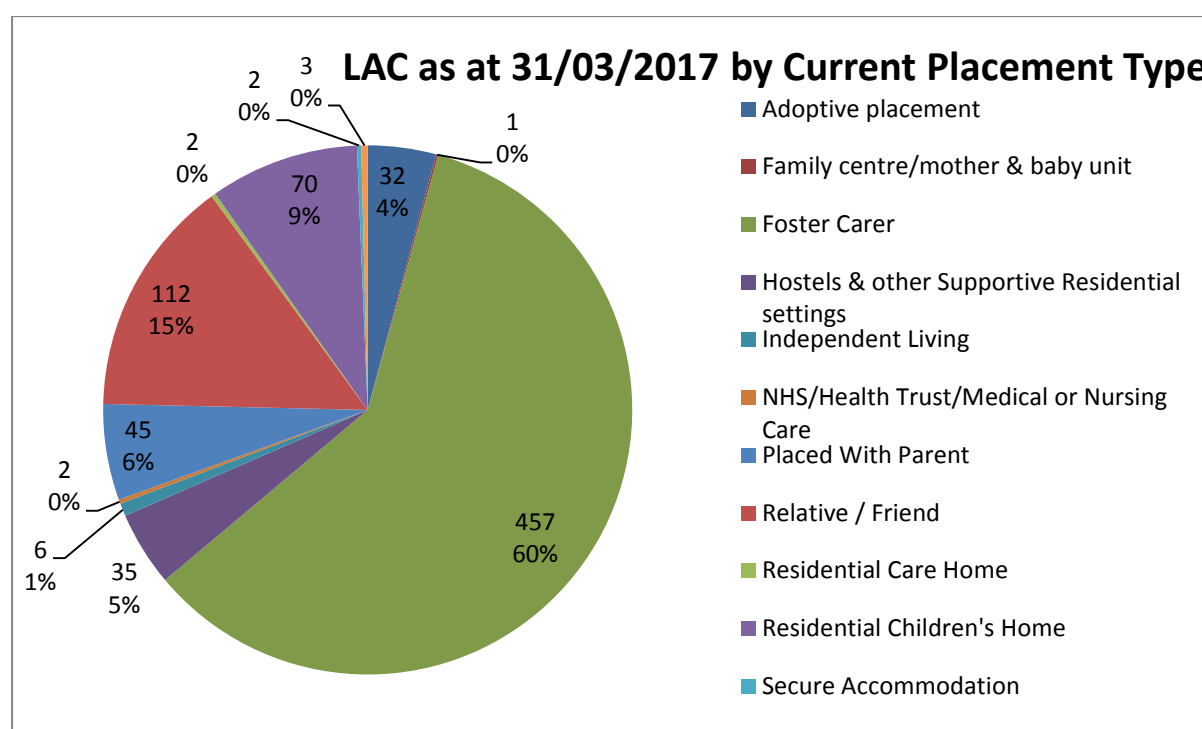
Status Prior to LAC for LAC Starts in 2016/17

<u>Status Prior to LAC</u>	<u>No of Children</u>	<u>%</u>
<u>CP</u>	<u>200</u>	<u>59%</u>
<u>CIN</u>	<u>87</u>	<u>26%</u>
<u>None</u>	<u>54</u>	<u>16%</u>
<u>Total LAC Starts</u>	<u>341</u>	<u>100%</u>

10.8 Following new practice guidance for the use of Section 20 provision in the Children act 1989; we have undertaken two audits to make sure that children have the appropriate legal status. This is a contributory factor in the increase of the number looked after children being subject to a court order. It is also an indicator that there has been more senior management oversight on cases and decisive action has been taken to safeguard children.



10.9 The majority of our children are looked after within a residential care home. We are fortunate that we have our own provision of residential care homes; this provides us with flexibility and a degree of resilience. Not relying totally on external providers in my opinion is a sensible approach. Indeed 51% of the children in residential care homes are living in provision managed by Worcestershire County Council.



11. Children with Disabilities

11.1 Our Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) also reviews short breaks in some cases when the children are deemed to be accommodated during those short breaks. In most case short breaks are provided under sec. 17 of the Children Act 1989 and are not reviewable by an IRO.

The Children's with Disabilities Service currently have 33 children who are looked after fulltime.

12. Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children

12.1 We have a relatively small number of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children within Worcestershire, currently we have 31 children. Our unaccompanied asylum seeking children are a particularly vulnerable to trafficking and exploitation.

13. Feedback from our children and young people

13.1 We do seek views from our children following a review and these are forms are collated by the IRO Practice Manager. We need to improve the information we collate to inform our efforts to improve the service we provide for our children and young people. The IRO Practice Manager will be meeting with our Participation Officer to look at developing this further. We are holding a fun day jointly with the Children's Participation Team and the IRO Team in October 2017.

14. Advocacy and Independent Visiting

Advocacy

14.1 NYAS has recently been awarded the contract to deliver our advocacy and independent visiting offer. During 2016/2017 at year end that had received 103 referrals for advocacy from looked after children.

Independent Visiting

14.2 Independent Visitors are volunteers who befriend and spend time with a child or young person within Local Authority care. All local authorities have a statutory duty to provide an Independent Visitor's service in accordance with the Children Act 1989 (Schedule 2 Paragraph 17) and the Children and Young Persons Act (2008).

14.3 An Independent Visitor or IV is a reliable, consistent and independent friend who visits a looked after child or young person who is isolated, and has limited, or no, family contact.

14.4 Participation and Engagement Service will be party to the quarterly feedback sessions with NYAS and the Group Manager.

15. Building moves

15.1 The SQA service currently shares buildings with other services the Pines in Worcester and the Birches in Bromsgrove. We are being relocated to refurbished buildings in Worcester and Bromsgrove within next couple of months. The SQA service will be sole tenants of these buildings. These building will be our administitve hubs and where many of our Child Protection Conferences and Looked after Reviews will take place.

16. Development

16.1 We are pleased to announce that Worcestershire Children's Services are hosting a joint training event with CAFCASS and Hereford IRO service on the 3rd October 2017. His Honourable Judge Plunkett will be the keynote speaker.

17. Priorities for Business Plan 2017/2018

- Provide updating reports to Corporate Parenting on a regular basis.
- Ensure the Dispute Resolution Process is used more consistently and contributes to improving practice.
- We will track via our dashboard that IRO's maintain an oversight of cases in between meetings and address any issues outside of formal meetings; where necessary.
- Record of Looked After Review Discussions are completed and distributed in a timely manner. Review recommendations and minutes of meetings to ensure they are focused and child friendly.
- Improve children and young person's participation within reviews.
Ensuring that children contribute to meetings in the most appropriate way

- Review caseload sizes and capacity within the Independent Reviewing Team and look at how we can use our admin support more effectively.

Andrew Tombs
Group Manager
Safeguarding and Quality Assurance

18th July 2017