

# Worcestershire Children's Social Care



## Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report 2017/2018



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## **Introduction**

*"Looked after children and Care Leavers deserve the best experiences in life, from excellent parenting which promotes good health and educational attainment, to a wide range of opportunities to develop their talents and skills in order to have an enjoyable childhood and successful adult life. Stable placements, good health and support during transition are all essential elements, but children will only achieve their potential through the ambition and high expectation of all those involved in their lives." The Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations, volume 2 care planning placement and case review.*

This is our aspiration for our children and care leavers in Worcestershire.

### **Purpose of report:**

In order for the aspirations and expectations for Children in our Care and Care Leavers to be realised, it is important that this Annual report is available for the scrutiny for the members of the corporate parenting board. This report is also a public document and will be on the Worcestershire Council council's website.

This report provides a summary of work completed by the IRO service in Worcestershire for the period of April 2017-April 2018

This report will;

- Identify what the strengths are in the IRO service
- Identify what the areas are for development in the IRO service
- Outline improvement actions the service has undertaken in the last year
- Identify key priorities for the next year
- The report will be child centred and incorporate their views and wishes

### **Context:**

The responsibility of local authorities is to provide Looked after Children and care leavers the best possible experiences in life and support their hopes wishes and aspirations as any good parent should, this is our privileged role as corporate parents.

The Children Act 1989 [amended 2004] and the Care Planning Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010 specify the duties of the local authority to appoint an IRO

when a child first becomes looked after. The IRO should ensure that the local authority gives due consideration to any views expressed by the child and the IRO has a responsibility to monitor the local authority's performance of its functions in relation to the child's case.

The regulations clearly specify circumstances when the local authority should consult with the IRO, for example, proposed change of placement, change of education plan, or serious incident. They also specify the actions that the IRO must take if it is felt that the local authority is failing to comply with the Regulations or is in breach of its duties to the child.

The statutory duties of the IRO are to (section 25b (1), 1989 Act

- Monitor the performance by the local authority of their functions in relation to the child's care journey.
- Participate in any review of the child
- Ensure that any ascertained wishes and feelings of the child are given due consideration
- Perform any other function which is prescribed in regulations.

The primary task of the IRO is to ensure that the care plan for the child fully reflects the child's current needs and that actions in the care plan are consistent with the LA legal responsibilities towards the child.

There are now two clear and separate aspects of the function of the IRO;

- Chairing the child's review meeting and monitoring the child's care journey on an ongoing basis.
- The monitoring function should include identifying any areas of poor practice or drift and delay in care planning that impacts directly on the child and should be appropriately escalated. Equally the IRO should also recognise and celebrate good practice that has positively impacted on the child's care experience.

## **1. The IRO service in Worcestershire**

The IRO service is situated within the Safeguarding Quality Assurance Unit alongside child protection coordinators and the administration team.

There is a practice manager for the IROs and one for the CP chairs both the practice managers' report directly to the Group Manager for SQA.

We have a diverse team of IRO in terms of gender and ethnicity and age and all bring a wealth of knowledge and experience to the team. All have been Team Managers and service managers and senior Cafcass officers.

Full establishment for the Worcestershire IRO service is 11fte. We currently have 10/11 permanent staff and one vacancy which is currently being recruited to.

The IRO handbook suggests caseloads for IROs should be between 50-70 to undertake all core functions, this has been a challenge with rising numbers of looked after children and we had 3 members of staff off long term sick and caseloads in January were in the high eighties, however since the return of 2 members of staff and retaining the agency member of staff, we have been able to reduce caseloads to approximately 73-76 per whole time equivalent worker, this number is anticipated to reduce further when we have an additional IRO starting in July.

The impact this has had on children is that IROs have been able to increase visits to children before reviews and have adequate preparation and admin time  
We currently have 793 looked after children.

## **2. Staff supervision/training**

The Practice Manager supervises all the IROs and the senior administrator and also provides professional supervision to the Participation and Engagement Officer; supervision is undertaken on a monthly basis either 1-1 or Group Supervision

### **Staff supervision covers the four functions of supervision:**

- **Managerial function**

This covers performance of the individual and triangulates against KPI dashboard information, audit and observation and feedback

- **Continuing professional development**

All IROs are encouraged and supported in their professional development through training and annual appraisals to ensure we have a strong knowledgeable confident team.

- **Personal support**

This is an essential element of quality supervision for the individual, we all have additional pressures, outside of work as a manager it is important to understand what these are to minimise them impacting on the IROs work.

- **Linking the individual to the organisation**

This aims to minimise the risk of becoming isolated and encourages workers to look at the whole organisation and their collective role of partnership working to improve outcomes.

**Supervision Audit:**

All IROs have accessed dedicated monthly supervision, either through group sessions, development sessions or individual sessions. 100% of staff have received this, the only exceptions' have been for those IROs who have been off work that month due to sickness.

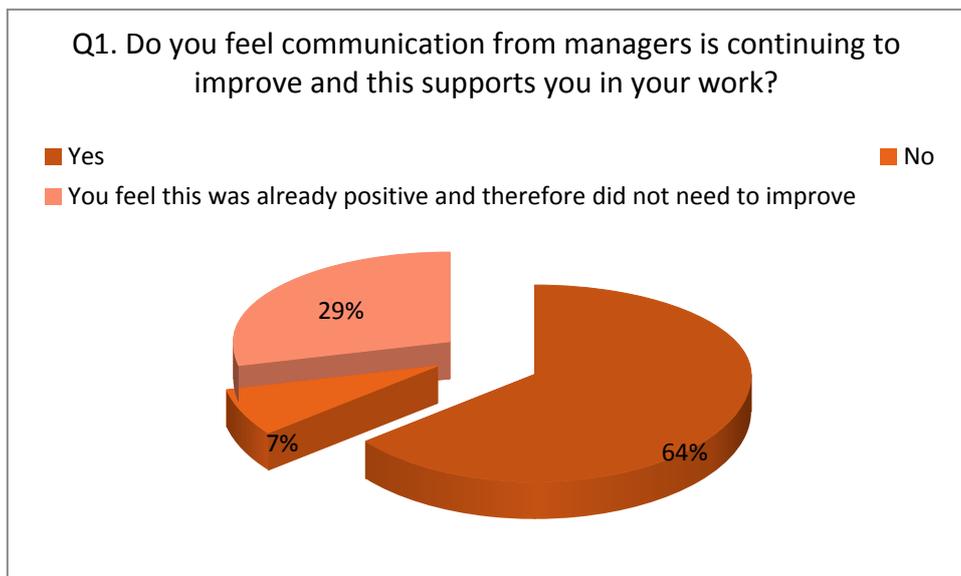
April 2017	May 2017	June 2017	July 2017	August 2017	September 2017
100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
October 2017	November 2017	December 2017	January 2018	February 2018	March 2018
100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

**Health Check Findings February & March 2018 – SQA Unit**

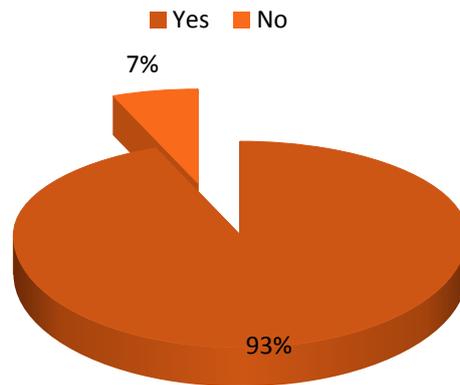
The Local Government Association document (Delivering standard 1: The social work health-check; LGA, November 2014) states that: “All employers should: complete, review and publish an annual ‘health-check’ or audit to assess whether the practice conditions and working environment of the organisation’s social work workforce are safe, effective, caring, responsive and well-led”.

The health-check is an important tool in supporting and delivering effective social work. It is a key element and covers the requirement to have a ‘clear social work accountability framework’. In Worcestershire this is one way we want to hear the views of Social Workers and the experiences they have in this role. Worcestershire Children's Social Care now undertakes quarterly Health Check's with Social Workers from across the service to act as a barometer for service improvement from the voice of Social Workers.

**Safeguarding Quality & Assurance**

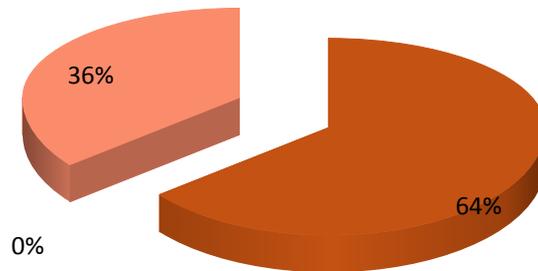


Q2. Do you receive monthly dedicated time for supervision and review of your performance?



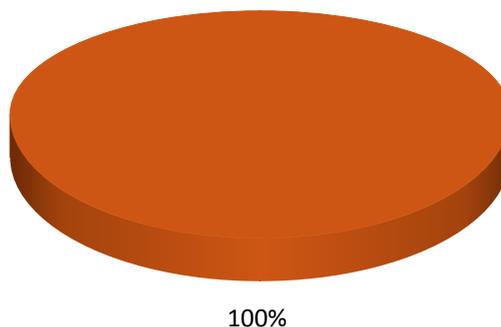
Q3. Have you experienced improvement in line manager supervision and support? Are your concerns dealt with effectively?

■ Yes ■ No  
■ You feel this was already positive and therefore did not need to improve



Q4. Are you encouraged to attend training?

■ Yes ■ No  
0%



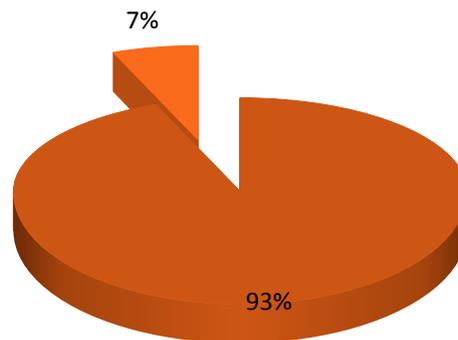
Q5. Have you experienced a reduction in case load?

■ Yes ■ No



Q6. Do you find the Practice Standards and Frameworki developments useful in practice?

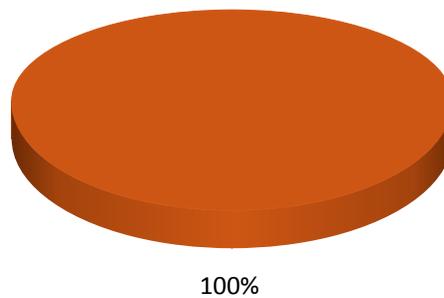
■ Yes ■ No

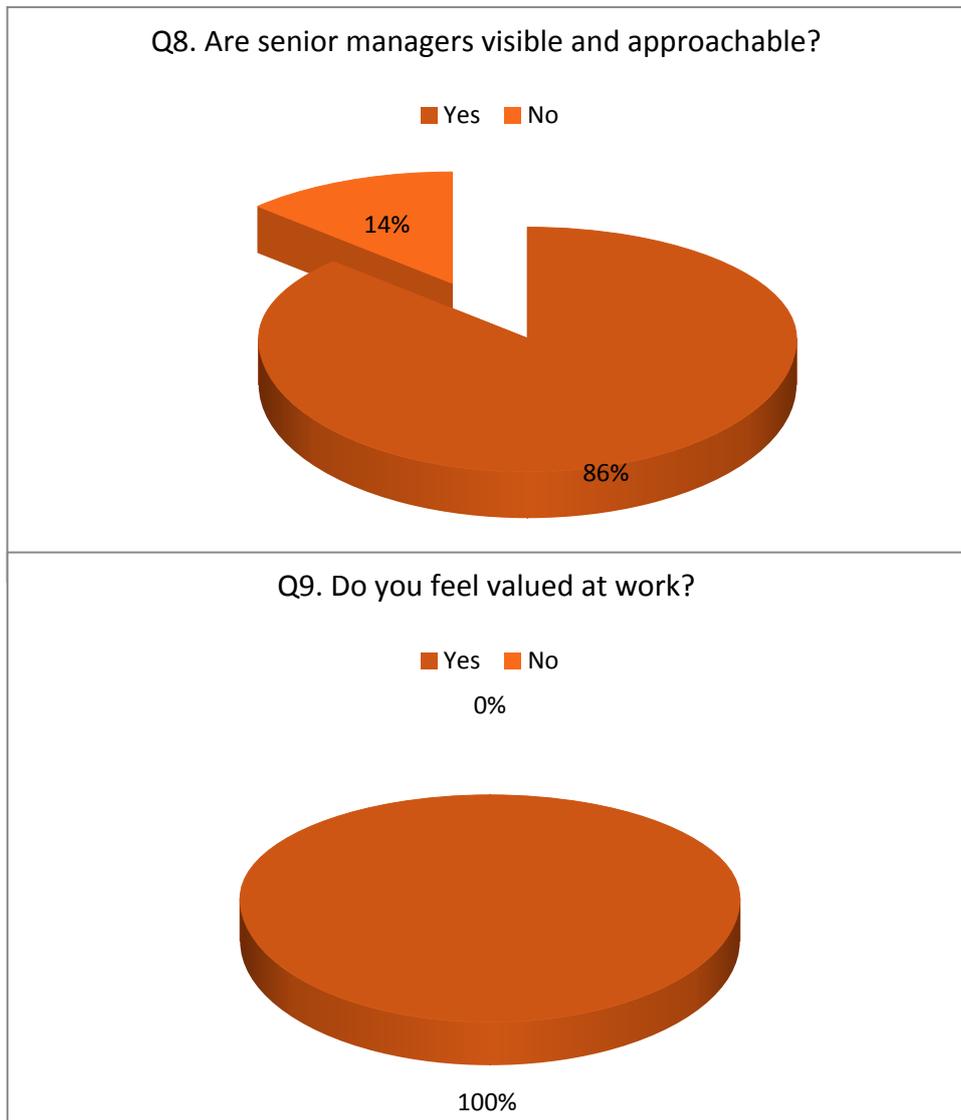


Q7. Do you know who the Principal Social Worker is and how to access him to share your views?

■ Yes ■ No

0%





In addition to monthly supervision the service has a number of forms and mechanisms to ensure that we are sharing information and promoting practice development:

- Monthly Meetings: Monthly team meetings/whole service meetings where information is shared from across the service, ideas are brought to the table, and we invite speakers in and track agreed team actions.
- Development Meetings: these meetings are held approximately every 6 weeks where as a service we look at feedback from young people and partners new government legislation/initiatives. We reflect on what is going well and what we need to do differently, it is a forum for sharing ideas and learning.
- Signs of Safety: The whole team have completed the 2 x day signs of safety training and are using a strengths based approach to look after review meetings. We have five practice Champions within the IRO cohort we will be introducing Signs of Safety practices into our meetings through Appreciative Enquiry and Group Supervision.

- Social Work Forum: the Social Work Forum is a monthly meeting for any Social Work Qualified Staff member to attend; this is open to Independent Reviewing Officers and is an opportunity to share views of working in Worcestershire.
- End to End: the End to End Leadership Meetings are bi-monthly meetings for all Senior Managers, Front Line Managers, Advanced Practitioners and IROs/CP Chairs from across the service. This is a forum to share and celebrate good practice, disseminate key information and build relationships with wider staff.

### **3. Value of the IRO service by partners**

The feedback from social workers and team managers has not been sought formally as part of our service business plan to date. But anecdotal feedback is manager's experiences of the service vary, dependent on which IRO they are working with.

Managers speak of very positive helpful interactions with IROs that really do assist in care planning and the relationship is open and honest. Equally some managers have found the IRO relationship to be fraught and confrontational and unhelpful at times, this is an area of development for the service.

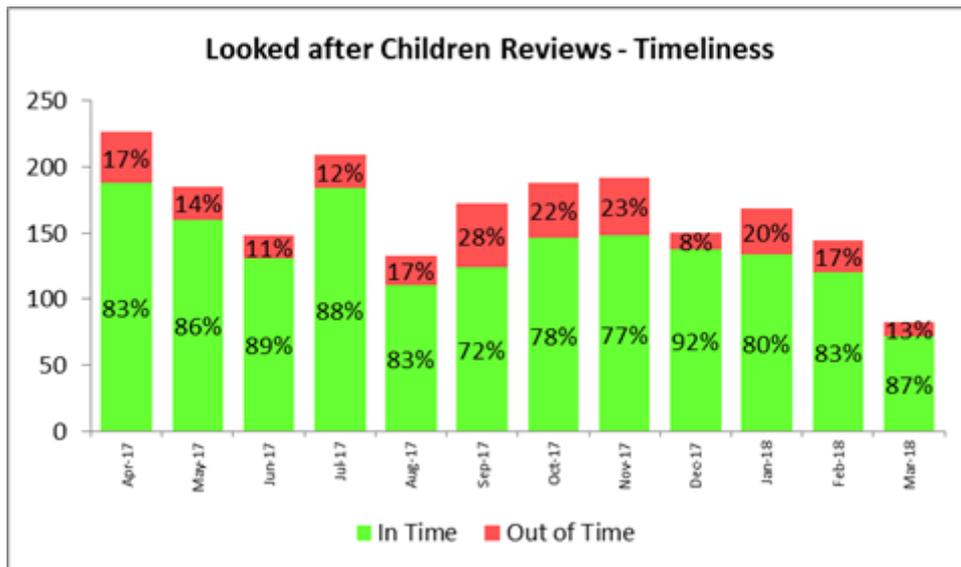
Our vision is to have a consistent approach across the IRO service, in terms of practice, that is based on strengthening relationships with social workers, Team and Group managers, but also providing consistent robust challenge where required. Children and carers have told us they value the IRO service and feel it does make a positive difference to the lives of looked after children.

We will be seeking formal feedback as part of our 18/19 service Business plan.

### **4. Looked after Review Meetings**

The first looked after review meeting should take place within 20 days of the child becoming looked after. The second/permanency review should take place within 3 months after the first review and the subsequent review should take place at 6 monthly intervals.

Please see below table that evidences reviews completed in timescales over the last 12 months.



There has been considerable sickness of 3 workers over the last 12 months, and this has had a significant impact on looked after reviews taking place in timescales as they have been covered by existing IROs.

Other factors are late notifications of change of circumstances reports to the IRO service; this should be completed by the SW when a child becomes looked after this triggers allocation to an IRO. If the notification is late it reduces the window to get the first review meeting being held within 20 days.

Other factors include some reviews being adjourned due to updated assessments not being available for the permanency review which means the IRO is not in a position to ratify the care plan.

It is a priority for the service to ensure Looked after Child Reviews take place within statutory timescales in order to ensure there is no drift and delay in quality assuring the Local Authorities care plan for a child in care. We have poor performance in this KPI this year and it is a priority to improve in 18/19.

## 5. Consultation with looked after children

What we have done to improve?

- We have introduced a new revised feedback form for children and young people following their Looked after Child Review. This was formally launched at the beginning of May 2018. Over the first month of the new form we received 17 feedback forms from Young People.
  - 82% reported that they understood why they were looked after.
  - 94% reported that they were able to talk to their IRO on their own.
  - 76% were clear on their plan moving forward following their review.
  - 70% reported that professionals in their network did what they agreed to do.
  - 94% knew who to contact their IRO if they wished to between Reviews.
- We held a consultation event with looked after children in October 2017 where 28 children and their carers attended and gave us their views on how the meetings could be better. Children and young people told us;

- Make my meetings happy
  - Let me decide who comes
  - Don't want my meeting in an office
  - I want to say what is discussed
  - Let me have my say in the meeting
  - Make things better
  - Can we have some juice and biscuits
- We have embedded this valuable learning and are now changing the way meetings are held, ensuring they are more child focussed by using a strengths based approach by asking them;
    - Who they want at their review
    - Where they want their meeting to take place
    - What do they want to talk about
    - Minutes of meetings are now aligned to this so they are easier for children and young people to read and mean something to them
  - Our new approach has been shared at Corporate Parenting Board, Social Work Forum (June 2018), and fostering forums (May 2018).
  - We have developed IRO introduction cards for all IROs.



IRO Introduction  
Card (Example).pub

- We held another 11+ consultation event on the 30<sup>th</sup> of May to ask our older children what we can do to improve their meetings. They told us;
  - Ensuring Meetings are fun and engaging
  - Meetings not to be held in Offices
  - The record of the meeting needs to be shorter
- We are piloting Mind of My Own (MOMO) in June 2018 to seek more qualitative information regarding consulting our looked after children.
- The whole of the organisation is proactively seeking feedback on the services we deliver so consultation will be evident in every part of the business over time.

## 6. Children's participation and attendance

### **Attendance & Participation:**

We have now started to capture this information more robustly through the use of a developed Dashboard and current figures demonstrate some improvement however the need for a relentless focus on improving children's participation and attendance at their Looked after Reviews; the below data capture key headlines in respect of Attendance and Participation in March, April and May 2018.

Attendance (PN1, PN2, PN3 & PN4):	60.0% (84/140)	67.6% (94/139)	62.7% (84/134)
Participation (PN1, PN2, PN3, PN5 & PN6):	95.0% (133/140)	93.5% (130/139)	91.8% (123/134)

### Looked After Review Timescales:

There is an improving picture in respect of Looked after Child Reviews being held in timescales.

	Mar 2018			Apr 2018			May 2018		
	In time	Total	Percentage in time	In time	Total	Percentage in time	In time	Total	Percentage in time
First LAC reviews completed on time	<a href="#">10</a>	<a href="#">18</a>	55.6%	<a href="#">15</a>	<a href="#">25</a>	60.0%	<a href="#">6</a>	<a href="#">9</a>	66.7%
Second LAC reviews completed on time	<a href="#">11</a>	<a href="#">13</a>	84.6%	<a href="#">18</a>	<a href="#">20</a>	90.0%	<a href="#">8</a>	<a href="#">8</a>	100.0%
Subsequent LAC reviews completed on time	<a href="#">125</a>	<a href="#">129</a>	96.9%	<a href="#">69</a>	<a href="#">78</a>	88.5%	<a href="#">60</a>	<a href="#">64</a>	93.8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>146</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>91.3%</b>	<b>102</b>	<b>123</b>	<b>82.9%</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>91.4%</b>

### Venues:

The below information demonstrates a changing picture of where Children's reviews are being held and this is in direct response to the feedback of our children and young people. There has been a month on month improvement of the number of reviews being held in children's placements.

Venue	Mar 2018		Apr 2018		May 2018		Total
	No. of reviews	% of reviews	No. of reviews	% of reviews	No. of reviews	% of reviews	
Placement	<a href="#">59</a>	34.7%	<a href="#">65</a>	36.5%	<a href="#">72</a>	41.9%	196
School	<a href="#">68</a>	40.0%	<a href="#">50</a>	28.1%	<a href="#">55</a>	32.0%	173
Other	<a href="#">17</a>	10.0%	<a href="#">12</a>	6.7%	<a href="#">18</a>	10.5%	47
Office	<a href="#">26</a>	15.3%	<a href="#">51</a>	28.7%	<a href="#">27</a>	15.7%	104
<b>Total number of reviews for each venue</b>	<b>170</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>178</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>172</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>520</b>

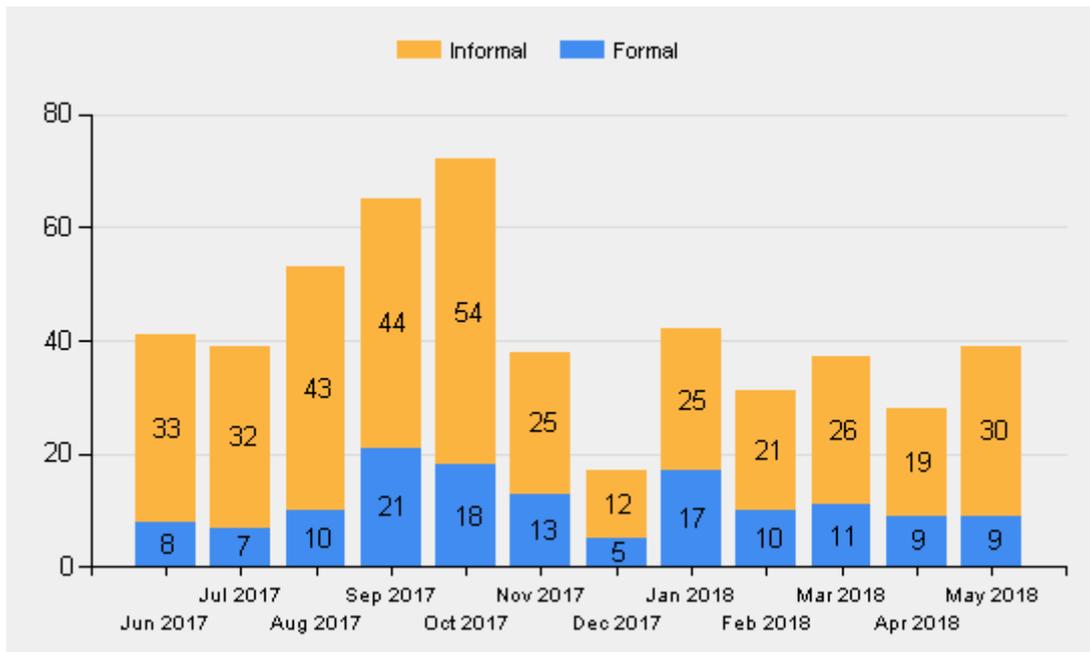
### What have we done?

- We have updated the looked after Children's electronic form, this is where IROs record the participation and attendance of children and young people at their meeting. This generates information regarding participation and attendance rates and where the meeting took place.
- We are working hard to reduce the number of meetings in offices and increase the number of meetings in placement; this has been quite a challenge as there has been some reluctance from carers to agree to have meetings in the child's placement. In addition historically there have always been a high number of meetings in offices so it has required a shift and change in practice. Current figures for April evidence 36.5% of meetings are taking place in placement and approx. 27% are taking place in schools and offices and the remaining 7% is taking place elsewhere, this is still an area for significant improvement. I have asked all IROs to look at meeting venues arranged for the next 6 months and any scheduled in offices to be moved where possible.

## 7. Dispute Resolution Process

SQA introduced a DRP process last in June 2017; this is clear in terms of written process, with clear timescales; however the application of the DRP process amongst the IROs is very variable – the application of when a DRP should be used and when it is used is not consistent across the IRO Service.

As a service we are now able to demonstrate the volume of both Formal and Informal DRPs since this was introduced see graph.



However, we are unable at present to produce an analysis of the reporting and the key themes of DRPs; this will be developed within the SQA Business Plan moving through 2018/2019. This will include understanding the consistent use of DRPs and key headlines and themes, bringing out learning and feeding this back into the service.

## 8. QA Processes and Systems

The role of Independent Reviewing Officer in quality assuring the Local Authorities care planning for children is essential to overall service improvement. To further develop the service and ensure that it is robust, we will build a Quality Assurance system around the IRO Service which includes; Practice Observations, Service User Feedback and Auditing – this will triangulate learning and ensure a greater level of management of oversight of the service.

### What have we done?

- We have developed an SQA dashboard for the service that provides statistical performance live data this enables us to have a relentless focus on participation and attendance at meetings and also the timeliness of reviews. These are key performance indicators in ensuring we are responding in the statutory timescales for children to ensure no drift and delay.
- Where meetings are taking place – a greater focus on these being either in placement or where the child would like this to take place.
- We are developing the dashboard to evidence if minutes of meetings have been distributed within 20 working days of the meeting currently we manually collate these figures but this is an area for improvement.
- We have developed an audit schedule which will include the IRO undertaking mid-point audits on their children who are having a six monthly review cycle and will be able to collate information re themes and learning and this went live in April 2018.

### The initial findings included:

<b>What are we worried about?</b>	<b>What's Worked Well?</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minutes were not child centred and were too long</li> <li>• Minutes lacked analysis from the IRO</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child's Voice was evident</li> <li>• Evidence of an alternative communication method so a child with complex disabilities was able to attend their review</li> </ul>

- Every IRO will be observed twice annually by the IRO Practice Manager of them chairing looked after review meetings, an observation audit template will be completed and saved on the IROs supervision folder and learning will be discussed in supervision and at evidenced at future observations
- IRO minutes will be audited for quality and consistency
- Service user feedback and consultation will inform how the service delivers its core business
- Staff supervision and annual appraisals will track development and performance of the individual IRO
- IRO practice manager attends the regional meetings with 14 other local authorities to share information practice and learning

## **9. Essex Diagnostic**

Essex undertook a specific IRO Diagnostic by visiting the service on the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2018, during this time they:

- Held initial discussion with the IRO Practice Manager and Group Manager
- Observed two Looked after Child Reviews
- Undertook 12 case file audits focusing on IRO Records
- Conducted a focus group with IROs

The Key Findings were:

<b>What are we worried about?</b>	<b>What's working well?</b>	<b>What do we need to do?</b>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Caseload numbers for IROs were too high (they have now reduced and continue to do so)</li> <li>• A clear pathway and model of Looked after Reviews is not evident</li> <li>• Children not consistently at the centre of their reviews</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• IROs are passionate about the children they work with</li> <li>• The Practice Manager knows the service well, including both strengths and areas for development</li> <li>• The IRO Team is stable with a permanent workforce</li> <li>• Universally positive about the management support they receive</li> <li>• Good example of the voice of the child being brought into a looked after review – a strengths based approach to the meeting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a model to Looked after Reviews</li> <li>• Develop a clear workflow on levels of responsibility in terms of Looked after Reviews</li> <li>• Develop Communication with the wider Service</li> <li>• IRO Introduction Card to be developed</li> <li>• Develop the IRO Footprint</li> <li>• Application of the DRP Process and response</li> </ul>
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## 10. Signs of Safety

In Worcestershire we are introducing a new approach to our work with children and families; this approach is called Signs of Safety.

The Signs of Safety approach, seeks to strengthen assessments and maximise family participation and where possible they actively contribute to solutions to keeping their child safe. Using the Signs of Safety approach professionals supporting families work together to:

1. Look at what's going well in the child's life - the strengths.
2. Understand who is worried and why - the worries and concerns.
3. Identify what needs to be done to build on the strengths, reduce the concerns and keep the child safe - the outcomes.

The approach expands on the assessment to encompass strengths and signs of safety that can be built upon to stabilise and strengthen a child's and family's situation. The approach is designed to help professionals and families throughout assessment and intervention.

All IROs have all attended Signs of Safety Training and there are 5 Practice Champions for the service; we will work to introduce these strengths based principles into meetings to support and develop family participation.

## 11. Signs of Safety Summary of the IRO Service

What are we worried about?	What's Worked Well?	What do we need to do?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• DRP process is not yet effective or consistently applied</li> <li>• Inconsistency in practice from IRO service</li> <li>• Poor timescales for chairing Looked after review meetings particularly first reviews</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All vacant posts recruited to</li> <li>• Stable workforce</li> <li>• Regular meeting schedule and formal supervision structure</li> <li>• Office move in the South and the North of the county</li> <li>• Consultation events</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• IRO foot print to be more evident on the file</li> <li>• Midpoint audits, 30 to be completed each month.</li> <li>• Minutes and recs to be shorter and smarter</li> <li>• Improved timeliness of looked after reviews</li> <li>• Further development of</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff sickness.</li> </ul>	<p>resulting in a change in practice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SQA dashboard developed</li> <li>• Service user feedback strengthened</li> <li>• MOMO being piloted</li> <li>• Joint Cafcass day was successful</li> <li>• Introduction of the audit schedule</li> <li>• Mid-point audits introduced</li> <li>• IRO case note types evident</li> <li>• IRO introduction cards in place</li> <li>• Essex diagnostic was helpful in supporting the changes we are making</li> <li>• Increase in meetings taking place in placement</li> <li>• New operating model with smaller teams</li> <li>• SOS training</li> <li>• Reduced caseloads.</li> <li>• IRO rota introduced.</li> <li>• Permission to recruit an additional IRO</li> </ul>	<p>the dashboard to evidence timescales of minutes being finished and distributed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• MOMO and service user feedback to improve</li> <li>• DRP- improved consistent application</li> <li>• Review meetings to evidence strengths based approach where the child is central to planning.</li> <li>• Improved attendance and participation.</li> <li>• Strengthening relationships with key stakeholders</li> </ul>
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## 12. IRO Feedback

*"It was definitely more young person focussed which allowed the young person to understand the point of the review and how we can support her"*

*"Your calm and friendly voice really accommodates good conversation"*

*"I want to say thank you to my IRO and my Social Worker for being such a big help"*

**What Do  
Other's Say  
About the IRO  
Service?**

*"I am extremely grateful for your empathy shown today and it is really pleasing that we have a good relationship now which is in my son's best interest"*

*"Really liked my meeting my IRO looks out for me and is reliable"*

*"I think my IRO is very effective at helping and puts my needs first"*

### 13. Key Service Priorities – Action Plan for 2018/2019

	<b>Priority</b>	<b>Action</b>	<b>Outcome/Value for Children</b>
1.	Dispute Resolution Process (DRP)	<p>Redesign the DRP Process to ensure that this is fit for purpose and is useable &amp; accessible for both IROs and Social Work Teams. This is consistently applied by IROs and responded to by Team Managers in a timely way.</p> <p>To be able to provide a quarterly analysis of the use of DRPs and the key learning for the service to close the loop and continuously learn.</p>	Effective use of DRPs will ensure children's plans are being effectively managed by the Local Authority.
2.	Mid-Point Audits	IROs will undertake mid-point Audits on children's files between the 6 monthly reviews.	This will ensure the IROs footprint is evident within children's files and ensure independent review and scrutiny of the Social Work Teams action for the child. This will form part of a quarterly Audit/Learning report.

<p><b>3.</b></p>	<p>Signs of Safety</p>	<p>To develop a clear Signs of Safety approach to Looked after Children Reviews to ensure these embrace the principles of the strengths based approach.</p> <p>This will ensure that these capture the voice of the child, are strengths and relationship based and are inclusive of wider family members.</p>	<p>The value for children will be an inclusive review that is meaningful and accessible for children and will work towards increasing participation and attendance at reviews.</p>
<p><b>4.</b></p>	<p>Service User Feedback</p>	<p>Continuously seek out service user feedback to improve services for children who are looked after.</p> <p>This will be achieved through;          Consultation Events          Mind of My Own (MoMo)          Service User Feedback Forms          Audits          Compliments and Complaints</p>	<p>The design of the service is continuously influenced by the voice of the child so that the service is focused on their needs and is an approach of nothing about children without children.</p>