

# Worcestershire Children's Social Care



## Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report 2018/2019

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Dated: 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2019

### Introduction:

This report captures the performance, feedback and next steps of the IRO Service in Worcestershire for the year 2018/2019. In Worcestershire we want our services to be embedded in a vision and values of Worcestershire being a wonderful place for all children and young people, we listen to them and respond to their needs, we promote their education, we respect and empower family life and act to protect them from harm – our vision is key to the IRO Service and our Improvement Journey as this structures our work and focus.



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## **1. Context of the IRO Service**

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 those 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.

## **2. The IRO Service in Worcestershire**

The IRO service is situated within the Safeguarding Quality Assurance Service alongside the Independent Chairs for Child Protection Conference and Position of Trust Meeting; the service is supported by a Business Support Team. Each Team has a dedicated Practice Manager and a Senior Admin. The Service is under overall direct management of the Group Manager for SQA, Dan Adams.

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/or Service Managers – this enables us to have a robust service embedded in practice wealth.

The IRO Service is at full establishment and we have achieved a fully staffed and permeant workforce; this is a strength of the Team and brings consistency and stability for children who are looked after; we have a new IRO joining the service on the 1<sup>st</sup> June 2019 – this is an increase of 22.2 hours per week capacity. The Team is supported by a Senior Administrator and Administration Assistant. The IRO handbook suggests caseloads for IROs should be between 50-70 to undertake all core functions, caseloads are on average around 75 per full time equivalent IRO, the addition of IRO capacity will bring IRO

caseloads in line with Statutory Guidance and further support the development of the service.

### 3. Staff Supervision & Training

The Practice Manager supervises all the IROs and the senior administrator and provides professional supervision to the Participation and Engagement Officer; supervision is undertaken on a bi-monthly basis through one to one session'.

#### **Supervision:**

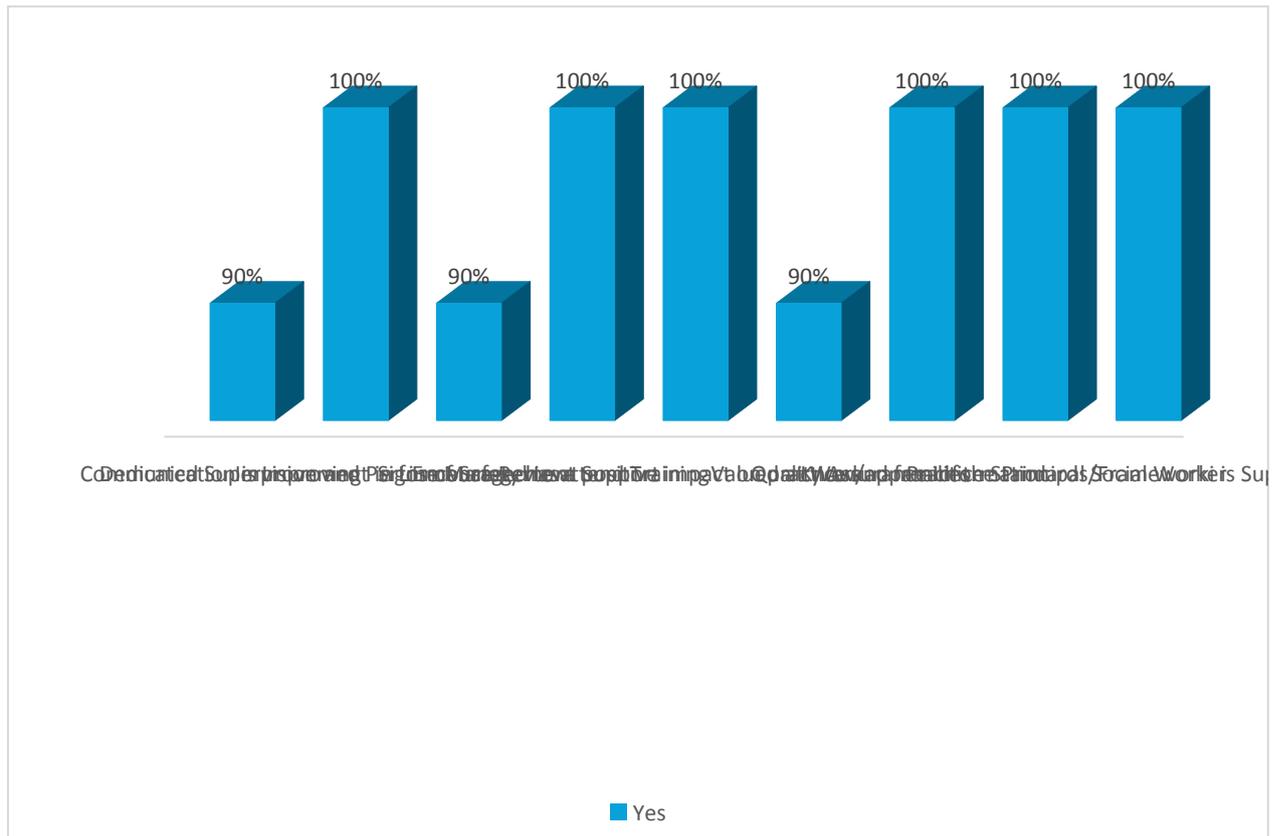
All IROs have participated in monthly supervision, either through group sessions, development sessions or individual sessions. 100% of staff have received this, over the last year, the only exceptions' have been for those IROs who have been off work that month due to sickness.

In addition to receiving monthly supervision the service has several 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.
- **SQA Service Meetings:** these meetings are held approximately every 12 weeks for the whole of the SQA service 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 two-day Signs of Safety training and five members of the team have completed the five-day training; they are Practice Champions for the IRO Service.
- IROs use a strength and relationship-based approach to Children's Reviews and this is applied through the Signs of Safety Model of Practice.
- **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.
- **Ask & Tell Sessions:** The Group Manager for SQA holds bi-monthly Ask & Tell Sessions for all staff in SQA to ensure senior manager visibility.
- **End to End Leadership Meeting:** 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.

#### 4. Health Check Findings 2019

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. The SQA Service is included within the Health Check and this was most recently undertaken in March 2019, the specific key findings for SQA Reported:



The findings of the Health Check evidenced strength within the SQA Service regarding how staff feel in their role and team.

From 2017/2018 we have seen our Staff Health Check KPIs remain consistent and sustained, but improvements have been seen in the following areas:

- Supervision was at 93% and is now at 100%
- Improvement in supervision/line management support was at 64% and is now at 90%
- Practice Standards was at 93% and is now at 100%

## 5. Value of the IRO Service by Partners

As part of our improvement journey we have now introduced quarterly feedback from professionals on the IRO Service, this was launched in March 2019. It is a measure of how others are impacted by the Team, what we do well and how we can improve.

We undertook a survey with Social Workers on the role of the IRO Service and this was run for two weeks, we had 21 responses during this time. Key findings were:

- 78% the child attended the review

Social Workers reported that IROs regularly undertook the following to promote attendance and participation:

- Promoted Mind of My Own
- Met with child prior to the review meeting
- Went to visit the child in placement
- Ensured the child was at the centre of the review

Social Worker reported that IROs supported parents/carers in reviews:

- Parents are included within the meeting
- If parents haven't attended they have been contacted by the IRO outside of the meeting
- Asked parents to share their views in the review
- Ensured translators were present for parents who needed them

Social Workers reported that IROs responded well in difficult meetings:

- IRO remained calm throughout
- Ensured children and young people understood what was happening and what discussions were happening
- Being clear with parents about what the care plan is
- Short breaks for children when the meetings were difficult
- Met with parents prior to the meeting to prepare them

Social Workers said IROs did the following to celebrate children's achievements

- Use of What is Going Well questions
- Praise throughout meetings
- Asking children what they are good at and celebrating this
- Asking all of those attending to present achievements for the children

Social Workers reported that IROs closed meetings well and said:

- Clear on recommendations
- Clear on timescales
- Ensuring next review meeting dates were set
- Ensured everyone was clear on the outcomes of the meeting

We asked Social Workers a scaling question:

On a scale of 0-10, where 0 being the recommendations being made at the end of the meeting were confusing and unclear and 10 being the recommendations were clear, smart and measurable. Where would you scale them?

The Average rating was 8.43 – evidencing positive outcomes from Reviews

**Ofsted said;**

*"The timeliness and quality of children looked after reviews have improved. Independent reviewing officers involve children and ensure that their voices are heard when children's care plans are being reviewed. Reviews progress children's plans by setting increasingly detailed actions with timescales for completion. In some cases, it is heartening to see emerging good practice in the way that independent reviewing officers are recording review meetings. These records address the child directly in a way that the child will understand either now or in the future, depending on their age. This enables children to understand their care experience and the decisions made that affect their lives" (October 2018)*

**What do others say about the IRO Service?**

*Foster Carer: "This is the first time in 9 years of fostering I have received a record of a meeting written in such a child centred way. I think it's brilliant and I could imagine children reading them, now and in the future. I read it out loud to baby O, a first for me; usually the reports are not written for the children despite it being their review"*

*From a Young Person: "I want to talk about me in my meeting because I am fantastic!"*

*Children's Home Manager: "The IRO ensured that the attendees remained focussed on the child and the child remained the centre of the review. The IRO kept the group focussed on ensuring that the outcomes identified at the review are in the best interests of the young person to enhance his life"*

*From a Young Person: "I love what you all do for me"*

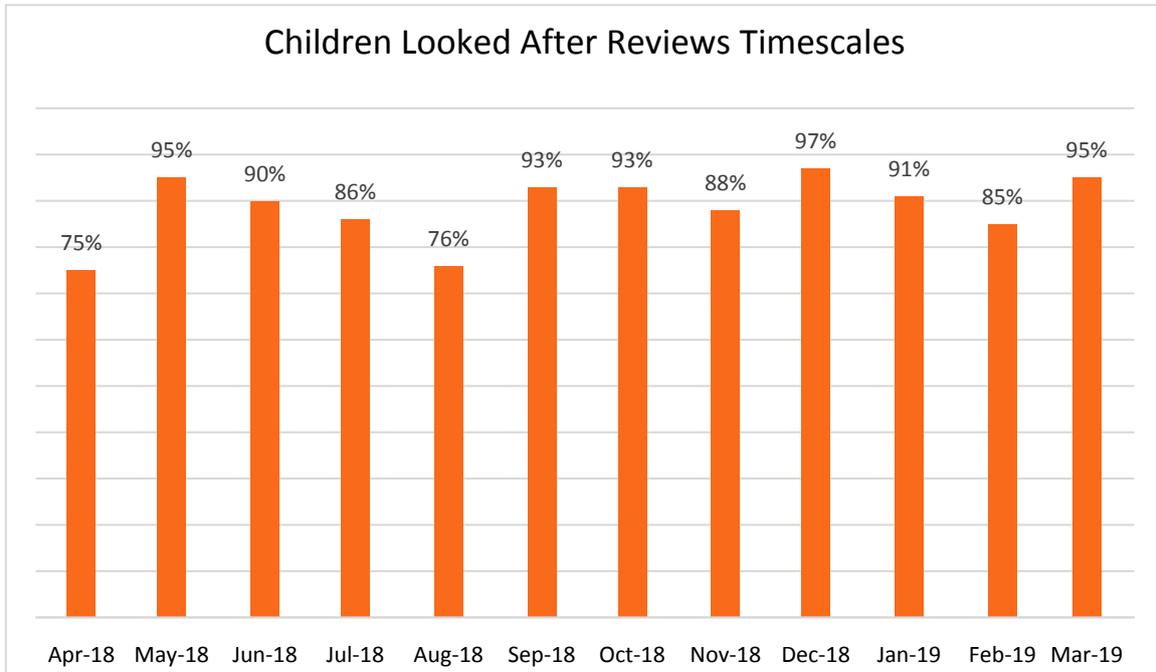
*From a Social Worker "The IRO began the meeting with 'What's going well' question and offered lots of praise that the young person, who dislikes his college course but continues to attend stayed throughout their meeting"*

*From a Young Person: "Happy afterwards that everyone listened"*



## 6. Looked after Review Meetings

Timely looked after reviews are essential to effective and timely care planning for children and young people who are looked after. A key priority of SQA was to improve the timeliness of review meetings held in Worcestershire for our children. The below graph demonstrates the improving trend of review meeting timeliness, the year 2018/2019 started with 75% of reviews in timescales and concluded with 95% in timescale, this was an improvement of 20%.



Apr 2018	May 2018	Jun 2018	Jul 2018	Aug 2018	Sep 2018	Oct 2018	Nov 2018	Dec 2018	Jan 2019	Feb 2019	Mar 2019
75%	95%	90%	86%	76%	93%	93%	88%	97%	91%	85%	95%

It is an on-going service priority to promote and achieve timely review meetings and that this success is sustained, as a team we have introduced an individual IRO Diagnostic Tool. This promotes IRO independence but also their accountability to ensure that they are working towards holding meetings in a timely manner.

In the last quarter we have launched a new SQA Dashboard that provides us with up to date and accurate performance information, this strengthens both micro and macro review of performance, holding individual workers to account but also Managers.

## 7. Consultation with Children & Young People

We have now embedded a revised feedback form for children and young people following their Looked after Child Review. On average we get between 13-20 feedback forms a month, this is just one way of our children sharing their views.

From April last year to the end of March 2019 we have had a total of 113 feedback forms completed by children and young people about the IRO service.

- The feedback forms are given to children after reviews with a SAE and are asked to complete and return. We have approximately 60% completed and returned by boys and 40% completed by girls.
- Ages vary but 8+ is the biggest cohort that respond, the feedback forms are simple and visual, and children like them and consist of seven short questions having evaluated all-of the feedback forms most children have said they do get chance to talk to the IRO on their own IRO, most said they understand why they are looked after.
- Most understand what plans are made at the meeting.
- Mixed response to the question did everyone do what they agreed to do at your last meeting? Most children cannot remember as timescales between reviews is a long time for children.
- We have had some useful suggestions on how meetings can be better, and children list preferred venue, refreshments being available, to play, to say who they want there and what they want to talk about.
- Very few children responded to the question do you have anything else to say most said "No", but occasionally we had children saying they wanted a new bike or a dog or to go home.
- Most responded no or left blank to the question about wanting to know more about advocacy.
- There was a significant drop in feedback forms being received in Sept Oct Nov 2018 7 in total in 3 months, this coincided with the introduction of Mind Of My Own an App children can use to give feedback but from January this year this has picked up, the number returned is largely reliant on IROs giving them to children, this is one way to obtain Childrens feedback the form has been revised and has emoji's on the form which children like.
- We have a consultation event at the end of May this year where we will be seeking more targeted qualitative feedback.



Feedback form.pdf

### Consultation Event:

We also held a consultation event with looked after children in May 2018 where the older teenagers and their carers attended and gave us their views on how the meetings could be better, young people told us:

- Let me decide who comes
- I want to say what is discussed
- Let me have my say in the meeting
- Make things better
- Can we play games before the meeting?
- Can the notes sent to us be shorter and easier to understand?

### **What did we do in response?**

We have embedded this valuable learning and have now changed 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 have changed, and the language is clearer, and child centred, and the review record is written to the child
- Our new approach has been shared at Corporate Parenting Board, Social Work Forum (June 2018), and fostering forums (May 2018)

We have arranged another consultation event in May this year to ask the children if they feel their meetings are better and if so why?

### **IRO Introduction Cards:**

We have developed and introduced IRO Introduction Cards, these are small cards given to all children and young people, so they know clearly who their IRO is and how to contact them.

Feedback from the young people is that they like the cards and it helps them to understand who the IRO is and what they look like and a little bit of information about them, the cards are the size of credit cards and Young people keep them in their wallets or the back of their phone cases.



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### **Mind of My Own:**

As a team we are using the Mind of My Own app and have been since June 2018 to seek more qualitative information regarding consulting our looked after children; IROs promote the use of Mind of My Own through reviews and visits to children.

## 8. Children's Participation and Attendance

Promoting children's participation and attendance within Looked after Reviews is essential to ensure their voice is captured, listened to and that our outcomes are based on their wishes and feelings.

### Participation:

Apr 2018	May 2018	Jun 2018	Jul 2018	Aug 2018	Sep 2018	Oct 2018	Nov 2018	Dec 2018	Jan 2019	Feb 2019	Mar 2019
97%	93%	89%	92%	94%	97%	95%	93%	92%	96%	92%	94%

In the year 2018/2019 we had an average of 94% of children and young people participating in reviews with a high of 97%

### Attendance:

Apr 2018	May 2018	Jun 2018	Jul 2018	Aug 2018	Sep 2018	Oct 2018	Nov 2018	Dec 2018	Jan 2019	Feb 2019	Mar 2019
70%	64%	58%	68%	72%	72%	72%	73%	62%	73%	77%	76%

In the year 2018/2019 we had an average attendance of children at reviews of 70% with a high of 77%

In the year 2017/2018 attendance was at an average in the 60% and we have seen an improvement across the year 2018/2019

### Venues:

In the year 2018/2019 we have strived hard to ensure reviews are held in venues that work best for children, we achieved the following:

- 43% in Placement
- 27% in School
- 30% in Offices or another venue

In the year 2018/2019 70% of all reviews were held in the child's Placement or School, promoting meetings away from Offices and where children and young people want their review to be held

## 9. Quality Assurance

The IRO Service has worked hard to promote their role in Quality Assurance and Footprint, to achieve this we have introduced:

**IRO Direct Contact Summary Episodes:** these are episodes to capture IRO Visits and phone calls to children and young people between Review meetings, to strengthen their footprint, evidence their work and to capture children and young people’s views. This was introduced in August 2018, over this period we have seen the following number of direct contacts between IROs and children and young people:

Aug 2018	Sep 2018	Oct 2018	Nov 2018	Dec 2018	Jan 2019	Feb 2019	Mar 2019
7	23	24	39	16	29	57	38

**In total we undertook 233 Visits and Phone calls to children and young people to hear and promote their wishes and feelings**

**DRPs/Practice Acknowledgements:** A crucial role of the IRO is to quality assure the work of the Local Authority; if a concern arises then the Dispute Resolution Process is initiated, this is a process where the IRO can raise a concern for a child or young person and the Social Work Manager will respond.

As well as raising concerns where this is required, the IRO Service also looks to identify and celebrate good practice, this is achieved through a Practice Acknowledgement. This is a specific episode where the IRO can formally record and recognise practice of the Social Work Teams.



DRP Summary  
Report 2018-2019.do

**Mid-Point Audit and Service User Feedback Section:** To strengthen the footprint and QA role of the IRO Service, IROs undertake mid-point audits each month for children who are looked after, this includes seeking feedback from them. Findings of these can be read here:



1 IRO Mid-Point Audits (April to August)



2 IRO Mid-Point Audits (September to October)

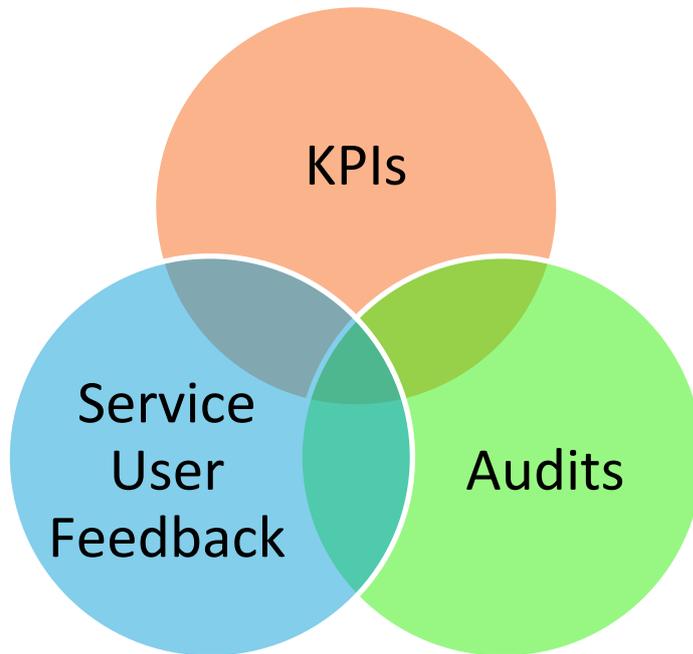


IRO Mid-Point Audits (January to March)

**Overall, the IRO Service has completed a 194 of mid-point audits in the previous year. 87 had service user feedback with is a 45% of the total audits completed.**

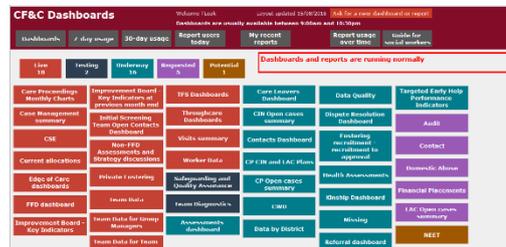
**How do we Quality Assure Safeguarding Quality Assurance:**

In SQA we have a few systems to Quality Assure our work, this is through Performance Information, Service User Feedback and Audits.



**KPIs:**

KPIs are one focus of quality but this gives us an indication of our work and that this is timely for children, we have developed a robust Dashboard that is accessible to all IROs and the Managers to review performance that is accurate and up to date.



**Audits:**

In SQA we have introduced quarterly targeted audits to review the work of the SQA Service and to evidence our work and improvement, these are reported into the Quality Assurance Reports for Children’s Social Care.

**Practice Observations:**

The IRO Practice Manager also undertakes an annual Practice Observation of each IRO to observe them in direct practice.

**Service User Feedback:**

We seek service user feedback within our mid-point audits and are now obtaining quarterly feedback through targeted survey’s.

## 10. Analysis of the IRO Service

What are we worried about?	What's working well?	What do we need to do?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure that we continue to strive to achieve timely review meetings for children and that this is consistent</li> <li>• We have a relentless focus on children's attendance and participation in reviews</li> <li>• DRPs application is improving but needs to be consistently applied and responded to by managers</li> <li>• Ensure our IRO Footprint is consistent and evidences both challenge and support</li> <li>• Ensure our minutes are provided to families and professionals in a timely manner</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We have recruited to a fully-staffed IRO Team and we have a stable workforce who are reporting a positive working environment through the Social Work Health Check</li> <li>• We have developed a Dashboard that is providing accurate and timely KPIs that provides rigour to our work</li> <li>• We have introduced an individual Diagnostic Tool for IROs to evidence their work and to focus on improvement</li> <li>• We are undertaking regular Quality Assurance activity through Audits and Service User Feedback – we are building a business as usual approach to our work</li> <li>• An improving and stabilising picture of timely reviews, participation and attendance</li> <li>• Evidencing our work through Direct Work Visits to children</li> <li>• Children's Reviews are written to children rather than using professional jargon</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The individual diagnostic tool to continue to promote individual accountability for performance</li> <li>• Continue to promote a business as usual approach to Quality Assurance</li> <li>• Ensure we provide families and professionals with timely records of children's reviews</li> <li>• Continue to focus on a consistent IRO Footprint</li> <li>• Focus on the DRP Application and responses</li> </ul>

**11. Action Plan for 2019/2020**

	<b>Priority</b>	<b>Action</b>	<b>Outcome/Value for Children</b>
1.	Dispute Resolution Process (DRP)	<p>Ensure that the Dispute Resolution Process 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.	Quality Assurance	Continue to promote a business as usual approach to Quality Assurance, ensuring we undertake regular mid-point audits, seek service user feedback and have oversight of the Service.	Ensure the IRO Footprint is evident for children and that we Quality Assure the SQA Service.
3.	Review Meeting Timescales	A relentless focus on ensuring meetings are held in a timely manner for children and they receive a timely record of their meeting.	Children's plans are reviewed and progressed and that they have a record of their meeting in a manner that is understandable for them.