

Annex 1.

Independent Reviewing Officers

Annual Report 2014-15

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**Deputy Safeguarding Lead: Children and Quality
Assurance**

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 This is the Annual Report of the Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) and covers the period April 2014 to March 2015. Since the Annual Report 2013-14, the IROs have been working against a national backdrop of:
- the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) reform being implemented from September 2014;
 - the growing national focus on children at risk of sexual exploitation following the Independent Report into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham and the Oxford Serious Case Review;
 - the increased emphasis on Children Missing from Home and Education, published by the DfE in January 2014.
- 1.2 The IROs have a key role to play in contributing to how the Local Authority responds to these issues for children in care.

2. Structure and Reporting Arrangements

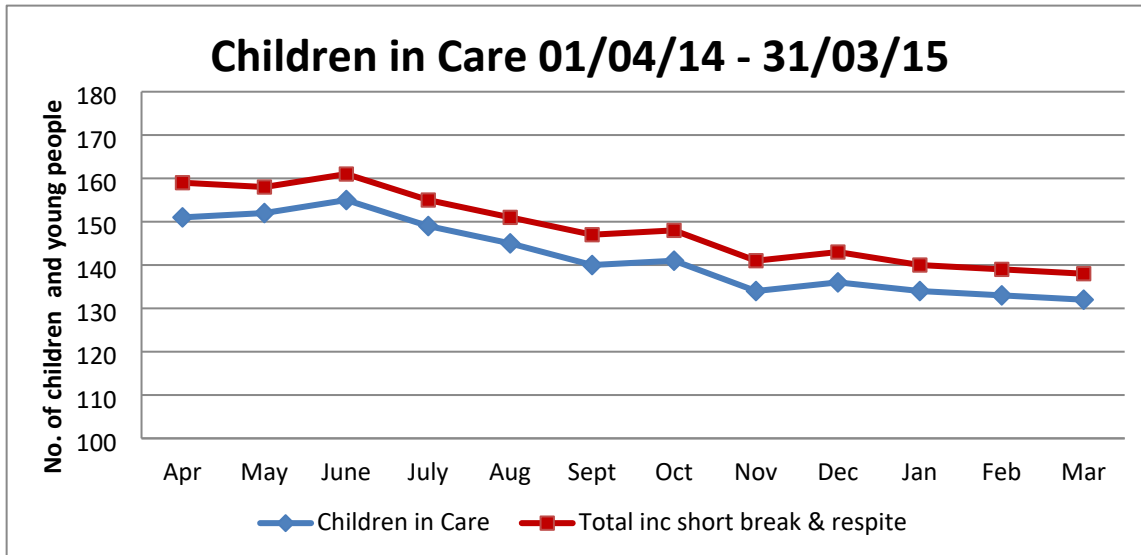
- 2.1 The IROs are managed within Children and Young People's Strategy and Commissioning and the team are line managed by the Deputy Safeguarding Lead: Children and Quality Assurance. There are 2.5 full time equivalent posts within the Service and one full time Administrator.
- 2.2 The IRO Handbook suggests that an estimated caseload of 50-70 Children in Care is a reasonable level for a full time equivalent IRO; this represents good practice in order to enable the delivery of a quality service. The IROs caseload is consistently within those guidelines.
- 2.3 The Service Manager: Care Outcomes, who works within the Children's Specialist Services, manages the service delivery for Children in Care which includes the Children in Care and Moving on Team. Some children will have Social Workers in other Children's Teams, this allocation can depend on what stage of care proceedings they are in and whether they have additional needs and are in receipt of short breaks provision.
- 2.4 Placements for Children in Care are provided by either the internal Family Placement Team or by Placements Commissioning who procure placements with Independent Fostering Agencies and residential providers.
- 2.5 Under the guidance of the IRO Handbook, the Service is required to submit an annual report to the Corporate Parenting Board and this report is also submitted to the LSCB. A mid-year report is also provided to the People and Communities Leadership Team.

3. Profile of Children and Young People in Care

3.1 Number of Children in Care

Diagram 1 below shows the number of Children in Care including children on short breaks and respite both of which the IROs review. There has been a steady decrease in numbers of Children in Care since June 2014 and this has levelled out over the last five months. As stated in the six monthly interim report (provided to the LSCB in March 2015), there have been some developments in Children's Specialist Services practice, for example, the Placements Panel and the separation of Children in Need support from the Duty Team which may have contributed to this decrease and are viewed as having a positive impact on the numbers of Children in Care.

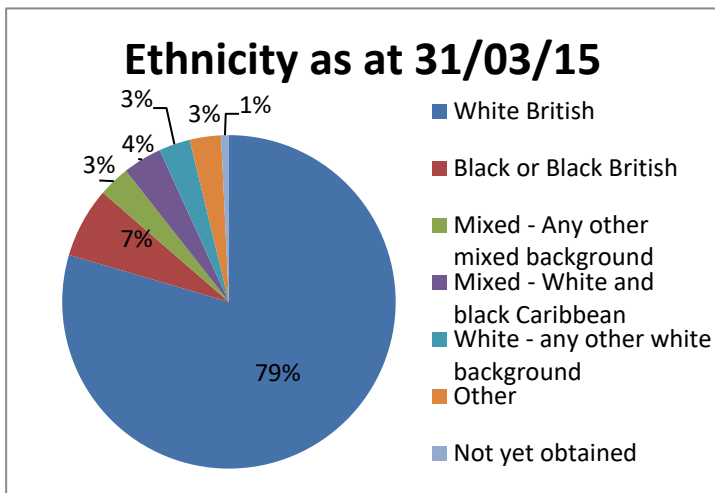
Diagram 1. Children in Care 2014-2015



During the period there have been 56 children and young people who have come into care and 71 children who are no longer in care. Of these 71, 14 were adopted, 31 returned home and 12 became Care Leavers at the age of 18.

3.2 Ethnicity of Children in Care

Diagram 2: Ethnicity of Children in Care as at 31.03.15



The ethnicity of Children in Care is set out in Diagram 2. During the last six months there has been a percentage reduction in the number of children who are white British from 83% to 79%; currently 21% of Children in Care are of another ethnic origin than white British which is an increase of 4%. The last Census in Bath and North East Somerset was in 2011, and showed that 10% of the general population of Bath and North East Somerset were from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) backgrounds. The BME population in the current Children in Care cohort includes children from diverse backgrounds such as Pashtun, Black Caribbean, Mauritian, and Bangladeshi.

Recent data collected in Bath and North East Somerset on Early Help and the Common Assessment Framework has also shown a 21% representation of children from an ethnic group other than white British. Whilst this might be an indication of Early Help targeting children from BME backgrounds with emerging needs, the representation of children from BME backgrounds in the Care population may require further interrogation.

Given the number of BME Children in Care it was important to note the profile of carers children are placed with. In Bath and North East Somerset there are 76 in-house foster placements and a total of 121 carers. Four are non-white households, and four carers are of Irish or Scottish origin, and one Hispanic. There are five non-white households used through Independent Fostering Agencies. The IRO Service will continue to check that cultural and heritage issues related to the ethnic background of the child are recognised in plans and placements insofar as this is a critical protective factor. It is

welcome that the contract with Stand Against Racism and Inequality (SARI) has been extended for an additional year and the IROs will continue to make sure that support from this service is considered at reviews when appropriate.

3.3 Placements outside Bath and North East Somerset

The majority of children and young people in Bath and North East Somerset are placed within the home area in Foster Placements provided by Local Authority Foster Carers or Independent Fostering Agencies. Bath and North East Somerset is a small geographical area and has limited foster placements and no residential provision for Children in Care. As a result, some children will understandably need to be placed outside the local area (the local area is defined for the purposes of placements as extending to a 20 mile radius of the borders of the Local Authority). Children who are placed further from home do require a higher level of vigilance than those children who are closer and who are more able to have regular contacts with their familial and friendship networks.

There were 39 placements beyond the 20 mile radius relating to 31 children and young people. Out of an annual average of 142 children in care, this represents approximately 21.9%.

- 3 placements were in short break units
- 5 placements were in Parent and Baby Units (four of these were court ordered)
- 3 were in residential schools;
- 10 were in residential homes;
- 9 were in independent fostering placements;
- 8 in Family Placement Team foster placements and
- 1 in a semi-independent unit

The IROs have developed a monitoring tool for children placed outside the local area, based on the required evidence in the Annex M of the Ofsted Framework and will be using this to audit a sample of cases in August 2015. Outcomes from this audit will be reported in the 2015-16 Mid-Year Report.

4. IRO Activity and the Difference Made to Children and Young People in Care

4.1 During the period of this report the IROs have undertaken a total of 403 reviews. The team held a vacancy for four months and flexibility with part time staff enabled the service to be delivered during that period. The IROs enter 2015-2016 with a part time vacancy which will be recruited to as a new full time post combining the Child Protection Chair and IRO functions. Appendix 1 shows the monthly breakdown of reviews.

The table below sets out a number of things: the numbers of Children in Care and those who have been reviewed during the period; the number of children coming into care and the number of children who have left care and the total number of reviews completed by month.

Table 1: Number of Children in Care and Reviews by Month 2014-15

	Children in Care(excl. short breaks / respite)	Short break cases	Children Coming Into care	Children who have left care	Reviews completed
April	151	8	8	5	30
May	152	6	4	5	39
June	155	6	6	1	25
July	149	6	8	13	56
August	145	6	0	6	24
September	140	7	5	7	39
October	141	7	5	5	30
November	134	7	4	8	30
December	136	7	6	4	29
January	134	6	3	5	35
February	133	6	2	4	32
March	132	6	5	6	34

There have been recent changes in the delivery of services to children which may have had an impact on the numbers of Children in Care. Children's Specialist Services have implemented new Children in Need arrangements to focus on prevention of family breakdown and work with children at risk earlier. The Placement Panel is also demonstrating effectiveness in ensuring all options are explored before a child comes into care.

4.2 Timeliness of Reviews

Performance against the local indicator (previously NI66) for timeliness of reviews for all Children in Care has remained consistently very good at 96.8% in Quarter 1, 96.4% in Quarter 2, 95.8% in Quarter 3 and 93.3% Quarter 4. The reasons for lateness have been related to sickness absence and we have demonstrated a steady improvement on timeliness since 2009/2010 when it was 55%. The unstinting flexibility of the team to adapt their work patterns to ensure timeliness has been a key factor in meeting timeliness and performance is strengthened by the team approaching reviews as a continuing process with children rather than the meeting as a single event. The team audited the use of process reviews in January 2015. 20 cases were audited and the aim was to enquire into whether process reviews impacted on timeliness and to audit the distribution of the minutes of the reviews. The IROs found that whilst process reviews are enabling them to meet timescales, there is a delay in getting the notes to young people and carers. The learning for the team from this audit was clear and it helped clarify which contacts or visits with a child or young person that we record as part of the process review. It highlighted the need to prioritise getting notes of the meetings out within five working days and that we will continue to review whether the increase in process reviews has impacted on the use of advocacy.

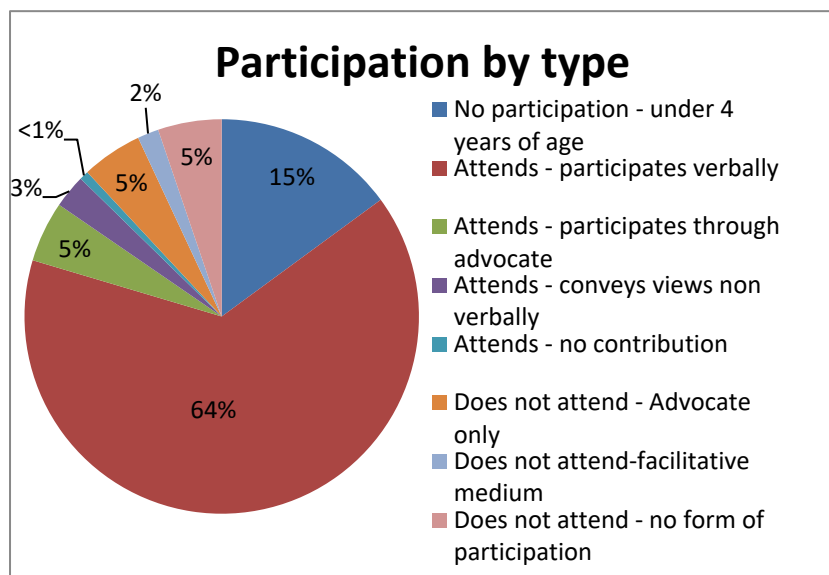
5. Participation and Feedback from Children and Young People, Parents and Carers

5.1 In February 2015 the IROs conducted an audit into how children and young people, parents and carers rate the service. The auditor found that of those children who completed a feedback form all thought the review talked about the right things, gave them a chance to say what they wanted to say and felt listened to. This is encouraging and a positive endorsement of the work of the IRO. Most children (19 out of 23) who completed the feedback form felt the review was the right

length. Children who completed the feedback form gave an average score of 9.35 out of ten to the IROs about being listened to. With regard to parents, Foster Carers and Independent Fostering Agency Supervising Social Workers, nearly all respondents indicated that the review was held at a convenient place and time, was the right length, that they felt able to share their views in the meeting and they felt that the meeting focused on the child/young person's needs and the plans for their care. The adult's view of the child's engagement in the review was 6.16 out of ten which suggests that there remains more to do to improve engagement.

- 5.2 No feedback forms were returned from in house Supervising Social Workers in the Family Placement Team or by Social Workers in general. There is a low uptake of written feedback from children and young people in Care about their Child in Care reviews. The auditor was particularly mindful that children and young people in care are often asked for their views about services and can feel overwhelmed and disengaged from giving feedback. One of the IROs has been involved in identifying an app for Children in Care – MOMO – which could make feedback much easier. This will be looked into further during 2015-16.
- 5.3 The audit did not focus on evidencing the difference the IROs are making for Children in Care. The IROs will establish a way of evidencing what difference feedback has made in shaping Children in Care reviews and the impact of the recommendations made in reviews. The Team will also be taking forward feedback for the Family Placement Team and ensuring that IROs also have an opportunity to feed into Foster Carer reviews.
- 5.4 The IROs continue to ensure children and young people understand the Council's Complaints Procedure and are supported if they want to make a complaint, either by their IRO or their advocate. In 2014-15, two formal complaints were made by children or young people; one of these was a young person who was supported by their IRO to make the complaint and this complaint is still in progress.

Diagram 3 Participation in Reviews



5.5 The IROs continue to be committed to supporting children and young people to participate in their reviews and are flexible in the approach to reviews to encourage this. In the past year, there were 403 reviews of which 60 were for children under the age of 4 and are categorised by Government statistics as not participating. Of the remaining 342 reviews, 318 children and young people participated in some way in their review equating to 93% of these reviews. This is an increase from 90% last year. The IROs are planning to further develop participation and training has been commissioned from VOICE, shared with

other neighbouring local authorities, to support this. This will take place in May 2015 and three Advocates from Off the Record will attend.

6. Areas of IRO Scrutiny and Monitoring

6.1 Care Plans and Pathway Plans

The IROs have consistently raised the availability of up to date Care Plans/Pathway Plans and the assessments that underpin them as an issue for Children in Care. An audit was conducted in August 2013 on Care Plans which was highlighted in last year's Annual Report; progress has been monitored against the recommendations and some improvement has been seen since then. In 2014-15 the need for Children's Specialist Services to have a policy regarding updating assessments was highlighted, so that Children in Care have Care Plans that are based on a thorough picture of their current needs. This policy is now in place and work is being undertaken to update assessments for Children in Care. The IROs have been providing feedback on this key issue to Service Managers in Children's Specialist Services through the informal and formal issues resolution process and to the Divisional Director for Children and Young People's Specialist Services.

The IROs have been highlighting the need for good quality Pathway Plans for young people in Care and this has been raised in previous Annual Reports. As part of making these processes clearer, the Service has provided input to a working group to address this. A new policy and process is now in place, and once the catch-up process is complete, all children and young people should have good and meaningful Pathway Plans based on a thorough, up to date assessment of their needs.

When a child or young person is involved in care proceedings in the Court arena, a Court Care Plan will be prepared by Children's Specialist Services and the IROs must have sight of these prior to submission to court in order to agree the plan for the child, as they would do at any stage of the child's journey in care. An agreed process will be developed with the Councils Legal and Democratic Services and Children's Specialist Services to ensure this is done in every instance.

The Deputy Safeguarding Lead has been working with Legal and Democratic Services to take steps to ensure the requirement for IROs to have independent legal advice is met by the Local Authority. Previously the team have had no recourse to independent legal advice and an interim position has been agreed to consult with a Senior Legal Advisor on issues where there is no conflict of interest or alternatively to procure legal advice from outside providers using the Framework Agreement shared by the four neighbouring Local Authorities.

6.2 Permanence Planning

At a child's first review, permanence options will be discussed with a clear expectation that a permanence plan will be completed by the next review held at 3 months. This gives the IRO an opportunity to scrutinise the plan and ensure that it meets the child's needs. In some cases the IROs have noted a lack of effective assessment of children's needs from which the permanence plan is formulated. This is currently being raised at each child's review and it will be monitored and feedback will be included in the 2015-2016 Mid-Year Report.

Children's Specialist Services hold a Permanency Panel to review and ensure arrangements for permanency. The IROs will have useful information to contribute to some case discussions and would welcome being invited to contribute by whatever means are most helpful.

When the plan is for children to return home an exit review is held to ensure appropriate services and support are maintained and the risk of breakdown recognised, planned for and therefore minimised.

6.3 SEND

September 2014 saw the introduction of the SEND reform which combines the Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans for all children who have a Statement of Special Educational Needs. Bath and North East Somerset are progressing with EHC plans for all children in transition years 2, 6, 9 & 11. Currently 36 Children in Care have a Statement of Special Educational needs and will transfer to an EHC plan as they reach these transition years.

The IROs and the Virtual School for Children in Care have identified a need for social workers to have ongoing training on the use of these plans and clarification of where Children in Care reviews will dovetail into this process.

6.4 Short Breaks

During 2014-15 Children's Specialist Services have addressed, with the input of an IRO, a long-standing concern of the IROs that children receiving short breaks were not being assessed in accordance with the Short Break Regulations (2010). Assessment now conforms to the regulations and enables all entitlements to be considered. Further work is now planned regarding children in care under Section 20 (Children Act 1989) also receive appropriate health, care and education planning.

7. Quality Assurance and Feedback to Children's Specialist Services

The IROs have continued during the period to strengthen their role in quality assurance. Set out below is:

- I. Highlight information from the audits undertaken in year, the changes which have been identified from these and the progress made
- II. The changes made as a result of the concern and challenge the IROs have presented to Children's Specialist Services and the impact of these;
- III. The work undertaken through the multi-agency Children in Care Quality Assurance group and the difference this has made to practice.

7.1 Audits: Since the six monthly update Report, the IROs have conducted four audits of their own practice.

- Recommendations made at Reviews: - 30 cases were audited to examine the recommendations which were made at reviews. Generally the actions were agreed to be SMART and some suggestions were made for improvement.
- The Voice of the Child: - 20 cases were audited to ensure the voice of the child was central in reviews; this is an area of strength in the service and the audit confirmed that. This is supported by feedback from the multi-agency audits in the Children in Care Quality Assurance Group.
- The IROs audited the use of Process Reviews to ensure these are being used appropriately and with the child or young person at the centre of the review process.
- The IROs audited the use of challenge processes between the IRS and Children's Specialist Services. As a result of this audit, the local Issues Resolution Protocol has been revised; a new process for providing feedback to Children's Specialist Services has been agreed with the Deputy Safeguarding Lead gatekeeping challenge and quality assurance feedback.

Feedback to Children's Specialist Services

The IROs have attended one Manager's Business Meeting with colleagues in Children's Social Care, to share feedback and will provide quarterly input at this forum.

The IROs have made a total of 25 direct challenges to Children's Specialist Services. From the end of March 2015, as a result of the audit mentioned above, challenges will be recorded directly onto CareFirst as Informal and Formal issues raised.

One of the findings in the audit of challenges made was that the IRO does not consistently get feedback to enable them to record an outcome to the challenges. As a result of the audit a pro-forma has been agreed with Children's Specialist Services with clear guidance on completion which will be sent from the Deputy Safeguarding Lead when a formal challenge has been made. The Issues Resolution Protocol has been revised to clarify these refinements.

The IROs provide monthly feedback to the Divisional Director of Children and Young People's Specialist Services which is a collation of themes and specific issues which have occurred during that month. This is not part of the Issues Resolution Process. The types of challenges and the themes fed back to the Divisional Director of Children and Young People's Specialist Services show the issues which are arising most often and they overlap with some of the themes that have been raised in the IRO Annual Reports. Feedback has been provided on the following themes:

- Examples of good practice – 13
- Plans which haven't shown any progress/no reason for lack of progress evidenced – 16
- Issues of practice and decision making which have caused concern - 27
- No clear permanency plan - 20
- Care Plan missing or need to be updated – 29

Having highlighted the need to update care plans every two years, the Children in Care Team has now embarked on a programme to systematically update all of the care plans so that none are more than two years old.

Children in Care Quality Assurance Steering Group

An IRO sits on the CICQASG which is chaired by the Deputy Safeguarding Lead. This group undertakes audits of multi-agency planning arrangements for Children in Care. The IRO is able to provide an overarching view of the planning for children in this forum and they audit their own reviews to contribute to the feedback. A separate report has been prepared by the Deputy Safeguarding Lead for the Professional Practice Group, a sub-group of the LSCB, which goes into more detail on the activity of the group.

8. Update of Actions Identified in the 2013-14 Report

The IROs have worked hard to achieve the goals set out in the team plan for 2014-15. Any actions outstanding have been either reviewed to monitor progress or carried forward to the 2015-16 plan. The Actions are numbered below:

1. The IROs are involved in a self-assessment working group in response to the Ofsted Inspection framework. As we plan to embark on a fresh cycle of audits, we propose to focus on the "spotlight" groups that Ofsted highlights which includes:
 - Child sexual exploitation

- Education of children in care
 - Children living out of area
 - Quality of work with children when they return to area. **Ongoing into 2015-16**
2. The IROs will continue to ensure that the voice of the child is central to all review notes and recording and promote the inclusion of Life Story work for children and young people. **Completed an audit and ongoing development**
 3. The Deputy Safeguarding Lead will ensure the IROs are using consistent systems for recording challenge and will undertake an audit of the challenges undertaken. **Completed**
 4. The IROs will evaluate and develop young people's participation in their review process and continue to support and enable young people to chair their own reviews when appropriate. **Ongoing dialogue and meetings with the Advocacy Service keep this as a focus for the team and Voice training to be delivered in May 2015 to help achieve this**
 5. The IROs will work in collaboration with the SEND work programme to ensure plans for children in care with disabilities are delivered to expectation. **Completed and ongoing**
 6. With colleagues in Children's Specialist Services, the IROs will review how we use the short break's policy and ensure we are working together to deliver the best service to these children and young people. **Complete**
 7. The IROs will continue to audit cases using themes from the most recent cycle as part of on-going quality assurance and supporting colleagues with maintaining improvements, alongside the introduction of new areas, for example, we want to focus on young people in the youth justice system, a group of young people who often experience a lack of placement availability and stability. **The focus of audits in 2014-15 was quality assuring some key areas of the IROs work.**
 8. In the year ahead, the service needs to make more active use of young people's feedback and continue to learn from this and adapt the service accordingly. Work is underway to update the children in care's information pack. **Children in Care pack has been updated by Children's Specialist Services and an audit undertaken has highlighted areas to focus on for the IROs.**
 9. The IROs will continue to promote the use of advocacy for children and young people in care and ensure that the complaints procedure is promoted whenever possible.

9. Priorities for 2015-16

The IROs have recently submitted the work plan for 2015-16 and are committed to delivering the following actions.

1. The Team will continue to contribute to the Ofsted self-assessment group and ensure that their work is contributing to preparations for an Inspection.
2. The IROs will continue to develop and consolidate its Quality Assurance functions and deliver a consistent service in line with the IRO handbook, the NAIRO Toolkit, the Issues Resolution Protocol with Children's Social Care and will be committed to developing a culture that drives forward all plans for children and young people in care.
3. The Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Team will work with the Head of Legal Services to consolidate a permanent arrangement for IROs to receive Independent Legal Advice as outlined in the IRO Handbook
4. The IROs will increase the quality of participation of children and young people in their LAC Reviews, including enabling young people and children to chair their own reviews.
5. The IROs will increase the ways in which young people are enabled to feel confident to make complaints

6. The IROs will build and maintain a commitment to ensuring the individual needs of children and young people are met in the reviewing process, using the learning from training planned for May 2015.
7. With Children's Specialist Services the IROs will monitor progress on updating assessments for Children in Care
8. The IROs will continue to monitor Care Plans and Pathway Plans and report the progress to the Leadership Team and the LSCB.
9. The IROs will continue to seek clarity for children on Section 20 who may require health and education plans

Jackie Deas
June 2015

Appendix 1: IROs Case Load by month

The table below shows the numbers of Children in Care and those who have been reviewed in the last twelve months during the period.

Note: not all children will be reviewed during the period; however they are all reviewed in year and / or as set out in accordance with IRO guidance.

	CiC (excl. short break / respite)	Reviews completed
April	151	30
May	152	39
June	155	25
July	149	56
August	145	24
September	140	39
October	141	30
November	134	30
December	136	29
January	134	35
February	133	32
March	132	34