

**WARDS AFFECTED:**

All Wards

**ITEM 4**

**CORPORATE PARENTING PANEL**

**20 SEPTEMBER 2016**

**INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICERS (IRO) ANNUAL REPORT 2015 – 16**

**Purpose of report:**

**Purpose of report:** The Independent Reviewing Officers assure the quality and oversee the care planning for all children in the council's care. They have produced a succinct but comprehensive annual report which details their work in 2015/16.

**Background:** See attached report

**Council Priorities:**

Milton Keynes Council will protect our vulnerable children from harm and neglect and provide support so every child has the opportunity to succeed. The council is committed to increasing the number of high quality local placements for children and young people.

**Performance Information:** See attached report

**Equality and Diversity Impact:** See attached report

**Recommendations/Proposals:** See attached report

# IRO Annual Report 2015 - 16

Date issued: June 2016  
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## 1. Introduction

This report covers the period April 2015 to March 2016. There have been significant changes and developments for the IRO service during this year. These have included a number of staff changes and an increase in the number of looked after children. A comprehensive Annual Report was issued for 2014/15 and this report consolidates and develops some of its key themes.

## 2. Significant changes and developments

### 2.1 Permanency Work

An emphasis on permanency remains paramount. One IRO continues to represent the service at the Permanency Tracking Group.

IROs continue to promote permanence for children and young people through the process of the Childcare Reviews. IROs and other professionals take into account the lessons learned through disruption meetings in managing careful matching and anticipating the issues which lead to the breakdown of placements.

An IRO has taken a lead role in the Sufficiency Project to look at those children who, with the right support may be helped to stepdown from residential to Foster Care or return to their families. There is an emphasis on careful assessment, planning and analysis in relation to these children. Signs of Safety mapping is used to establish the issues and help identify what we are worried about and how those concerns might be addressed.

An IRO remains a member of the Fostering and Adoption panel which has amalgamated the functions of the two separate panels.

IROs are asked to contribute to household reviews for Foster Carers. This helps address issues around support and training for carers specifically. It also enables IROs to contribute to wider themes identifying need and areas for recruitment.

### 2.2 Changes in the LAC Population

During the year there has been an increase in the population of Looked After Children. Amongst this number are children subject to Care Orders placed within their families as well as with Foster Carers and in residential homes, young unaccompanied asylum seekers and children subject to S.20. There have been some instances of children being looked after as a result of bail conditions set by the police which prohibit their return to parents.

Numbers of looked after children have had implications for IRO caseloads (See figure 2). Average caseloads peaked at 91.75 in July 2016. However some stabilising in the whole population coupled with more stability in the IRO team and an increase in IRO staff capacity from 4.5 to 5 in March has served to ensure a reduction in caseloads down to levels recommended in the IRO handbook.

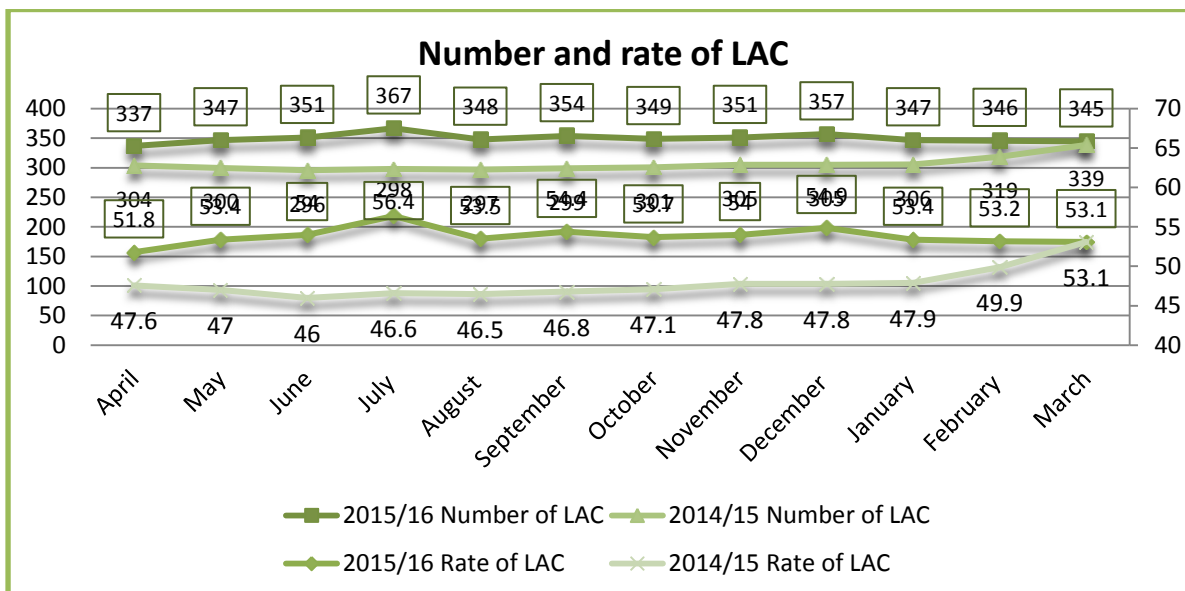


Figure 1 - Number and Rate of LAC

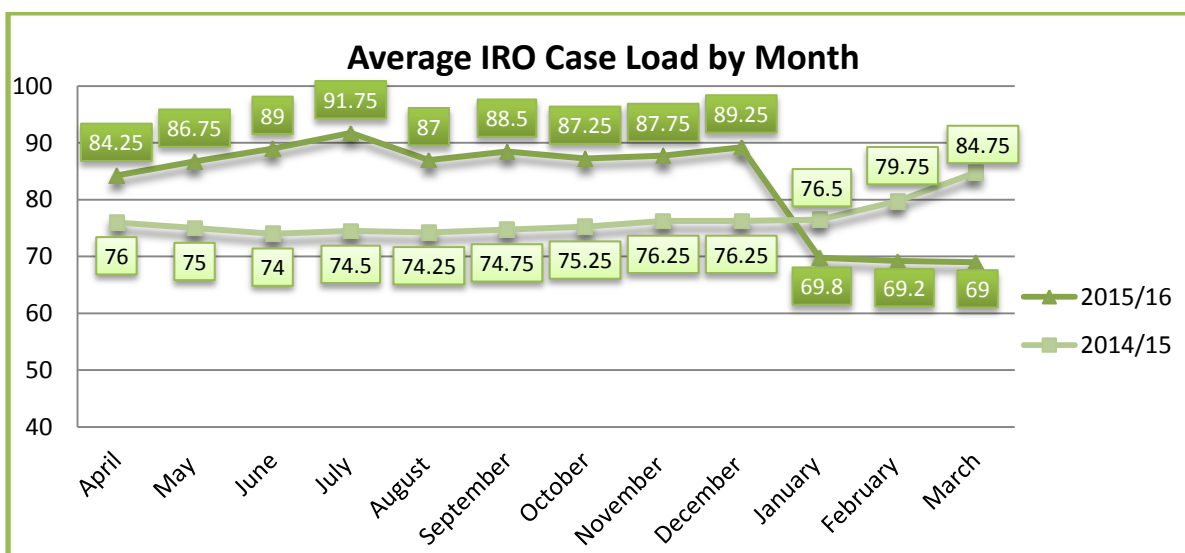


Figure 2 - Average IRO case load by month

### 2.3 Changes in Guidance and Regulations

The *Permanence, long-term foster placements and ceasing to look after a child* statutory guidance (March 2015) made amendments to the Care Planning, Placement and Case review Regulations 2010 with respect to:

- The review of the delegation of authority to make decisions about looked after children to their carers
- The arrangements for making, supervising and reviewing long term foster care placements
- The assessment and planning arrangements where the responsible authority is considering ceasing to look after a child.

This has enabled a more flexible approach to social work visits and reviews for children who are placed in long term foster placements. It has also reinforced the requirement that where a local authority is considering ceasing to look after a child that it “appropriately assesses the proposed arrangements for the child and sets out the support that will be provided when the child ceases to be looked after”. It stipulates that robust arrangements should be in place to scrutinise decisions to cease to look after a child.

## 2.4 Advocates and Independent Visitors

A new contract for Advocates and Independent Visitors has been agreed.

One IRO worked closely with the Participation Officer and a group of young people to go through the tendering process and select the most suitable provider.

The IRO group has since met with a representative from Coram Voice in relation to how best to ensure that children and young people are linked to advocates where appropriate. It is noted that Child Protection Co-ordinators have also participated with this process and the elements of the service are working collaboratively to ensure some consistency and a good take up of Advocates and Independent Visitors.

## 2.5 Staff Changes in the IRO and Social Work Teams

Once again this has been an unsettled year for staffing. This inevitably meant some changes of IRO for children during the year. However, the service has ensured all new LAC cases are allocated to IROs and reviews have taken place within required time scales (See figure 6), an increase to 98.7% from 96.1% last year.

During the year there were changes within the social work and management personnel of the Corporate Parenting Team. The IRO team prepared a paper and subsequently met with the Head of Corporate Parenting to discuss the potential impact of these changes for looked after children and how the IROs could support the service.

It was recognised that the Children's Social Care workforce are continuing to face huge challenges. Staff shortages in the Corporate Parenting Team and more latterly in Fostering have inevitably had an impact on children and the continuity of Care Planning.

A Service Plan has been drawn up and managers are now more embedded. Issues around training, policies, culture and practice are being addressed and there is a recognition that this process will take time if it is to be done properly and impact positively on recruitment and retention.

IROs are committed to supporting this process and contributing positively by working closely with Social Workers to share information, knowledge and skills. They will continue to promote the interests of children, young people, carers and families.

## 2.6 Quality Assurance and Service User feedback.

Monitoring forms are completed by IROs following each childcare review. The purpose of the process is to enable IROs to provide feedback and an overview of the quality of care planning and Social Work involvement for each child in care. One IRO liaised closely with colleagues in Business Support and the LCS team. The forms were incorporated into the council's database LCS in July 2014.

The table below shows the mean scores collated from IROs' monitoring forms for care plans, placement plans, personal education plans and health plans for each child. The monitoring process uses the Ofsted scoring system of 4 as inadequate, 3 requires improvement, 2 is good and 1 is outstanding. The scoring demonstrates that performance is closer to 'good' in all areas (with health plans continuing to excel); this has been fed back to services via Performance Management Meetings.

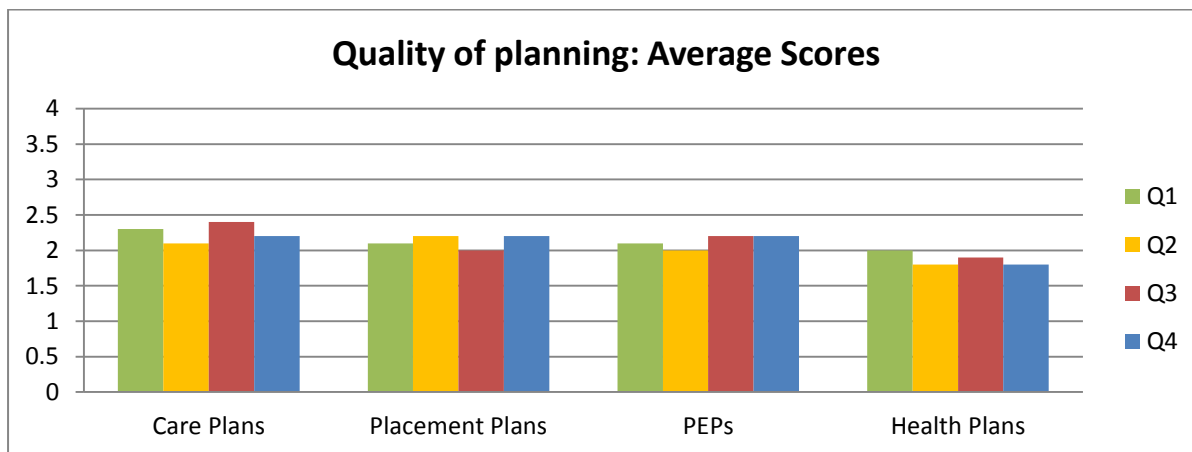


Figure 3 - Quality of planning 2015/16: Average score

IROs also continue to participate in the routine monthly quality assurance audit of sampled records from across children’s social care services and contribute to wider discussions at the Performance Management Meeting.

IROs work closely with the commissioning team and will feed back key messages regarding both the positive findings and the challenges identified when visiting residential and fostering placements.

An IRO is currently participating in the Sufficiency Planning work group in response to the need to develop more specialist services for some looked after children considered suitable for “stepdown” intervention (including teenagers with behavioural problems, young unaccompanied asylum seekers and young people leaving care). A cohort of children were initially identified and having had some success with this process another group has been proposed.

IROs gain feedback from review meeting participants over a two week period every three months and provide a six monthly report. This helps IROs to determine if meetings are addressing the needs of those in attendance. Key findings include:

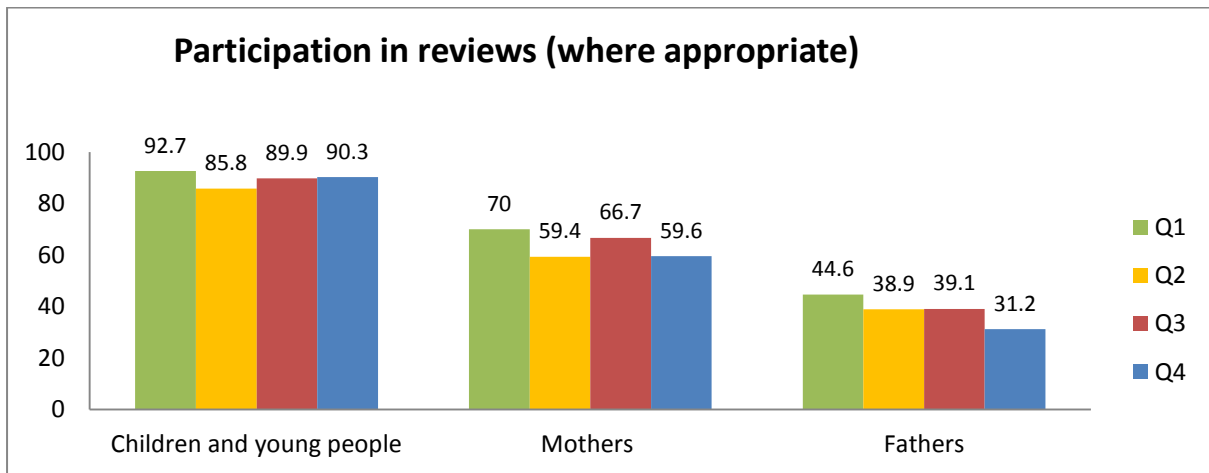
- Three quarters of all children present at reviews felt they could contribute freely to their meeting.
- The remaining quarter felt they could do so with help from another person at the meeting.
- Over 80% of children felt their views were listened to.

The findings were generally positive but indicate further work is needed to ensure all children and young people attending their reviews feel properly supported and able to contribute. IROs will continue to visit children prior to their reviews and prepare them for their meetings and will ensure that consideration is given to the use of Independent Visitors and Advocates.

## 2.7 Participation and Engagement

A new Participation Officer joined the service in June 2015. The IROs continue to work alongside her to support her with a range of activities. This includes the annual children in care awards evening ‘True Triumph’, the Children in Care Council ‘Our Voice’ (previously Todays Children Tomorrows Future) and the Corporate Parenting Panel.

The IROs continue to encourage children to engage and participate in Care Planning and Childcare Reviews. Work is ongoing to ensure that this is consistent and enables children and young people to communicate in the way that best suits them.



Children and young people are routinely visited between reviews to ensure that they are properly consulted and can participate fully. Many children are too young to attend their reviews and some choose not to attend. However a number are supported to co-chair their reviews.

One of the IROs has taken a lead in investigating the use of WebEx as a way of communicating with young people who are placed at a distance. In addition, discussions have been had about the 'MindofmyOwn' (MOMO) App as one of a range of methods to encourage children and young people to communicate and express their views. The IROs are assisted by the Participation Officer and the Safeguarding Improvement Officer to explore these options.

IROs work hard to enable parents and extended families to contribute fully and appropriately to the Care Planning process. While it may not always be appropriate for them to attend where children have expressed a strong wish for them not to be present or for reasons of security and stability it is not possible for them to be included, it remains important to ensure that they are consulted and that their views are included in the process of the childcare review. IROs will meet separately with parents either with or without the Social Worker to this end.

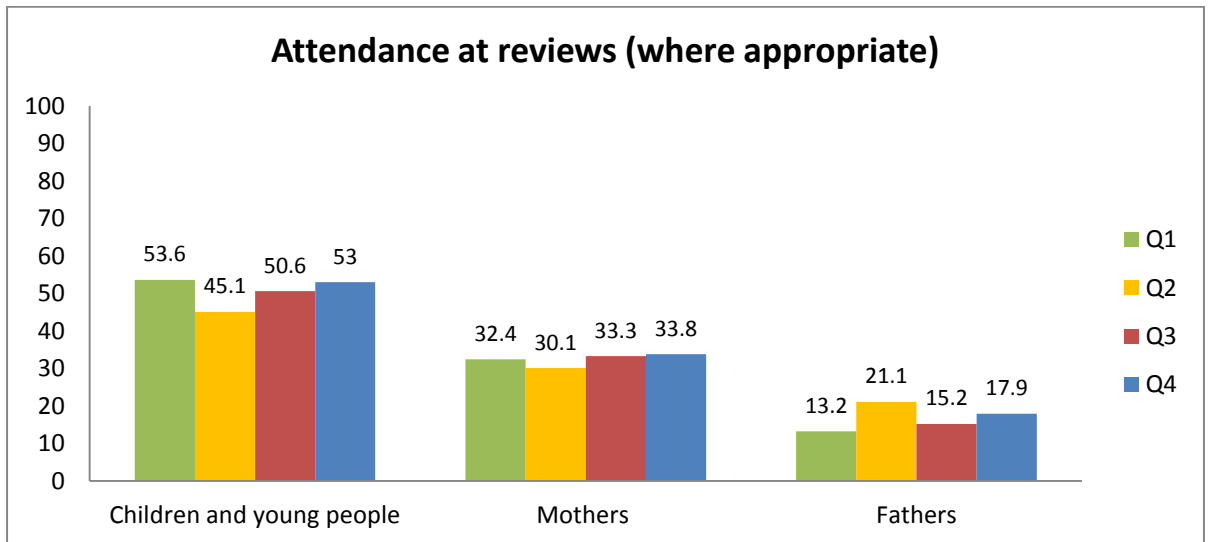


Figure 5 - Attendance at reviews – where a monitoring form was completed by the IRO

## 2.8 Court and Police Involvement

A number of developments have been observed as a result of changing approaches nationally and locally. The scrutiny of cases where children have been looked after subject to S.20 for extended periods of time has necessitated some discussions in relation to instigating proceedings.

There has been a rise in Special Guardianship Orders, Fostering Assessments and Friends and Families carers.

Regarding the difficulties in returning some children home due to police bail conditions. It would seem that this has been particularly related to incidents of physical chastisement.

Wherever possible IROs attend professionals meetings, Legal Planning Meetings and Care Planning meetings in order to remain fully informed about planning for individual children and to have an opportunity to raise issues and seek clarification where necessary.

## 2.9 Disruptions

The Disruption Meeting protocol was reviewed and updated in October 2015. It states that 'The chair of the meeting will be an 'off line' Children's Social Care Manager (usually a member of the Safeguarding Team)'.

IROs have chaired disruption meetings and will continue to do so on a rota basis. Summaries are reported to Performance Management Meetings.

## 2.10 Regional IRO meetings

IROs in Milton Keynes have been linked to the South East Region IRO Network Group Meetings. This has enabled the IROs to be aware of key themes and prevailing national ideology and has offered the opportunity for sharing of information and good practice.

## 3. Performance

Figure 1 illustrates a small increase in reviews held in timescale (within 20 working days for a first review, 3 months for the subsequent review and within 6 months for successive reviews).

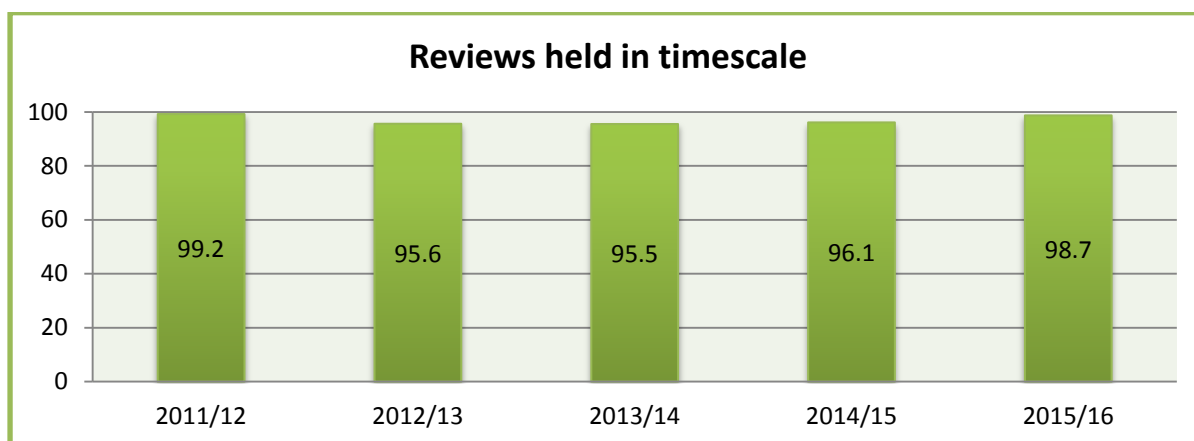


Figure 6 – Percentage of reviews held in timescale

## 4. Review of objectives 2015-16

### 4.1 Training on Care Planning

Due to numerous changes of staff both in the IRO team and within the Corporate Parenting Team in particular it has not been possible for formal training to take place. However IROs work closely with individual practitioners to highlight the need for good and clear care planning to improve outcomes for children.



In February 2016 a paper was written to the Head of Service responsible for the Corporate Parenting Team and the Fostering Team outlining a number of issues to be resolved and proposing that the IROs might play a role in induction for new Social Workers, in explaining the childcare review process and importance of Care Planning.

IROs have worked with the Principal Social Worker to highlight examples of good practice and assist with recommendations for training and support for Social Workers.

A proposal has been made for IROs to attend regular meetings with the Corporate Parenting Team including meetings with managers and attendance at team meetings. IROs continue to be happy to offer training and workshops periodically as well as being open to participating in joint training regarding specific areas of practice.

#### 4.2 Reports from Child Care Reviews

The aim was to create one document combining outcomes and minutes and including recommendations from Health Assessments and Personal Education Plans.

An IRO worked closely with the ICS team and with colleagues to ensure that a new document was produced. This 'went live' in March 2016 and has proved beneficial. The new form incorporates the Signs of Safety columns as well as providing for recommendations from the health assessments to be included. It is used by IROs, who are positive about the changes that have been made and find it a more user friendly document. Feedback from children and families as well as colleagues is also positive.

#### 4.3 Induction of Team Members.

During the period between April 2015 and March 2016, there have been several changes to personnel within the IRO team. A new member of staff joined the team in July 2015 bringing experience of management within the Corporate Parenting Team. Two more IROs joined in February/March 2016, bringing management experience along with knowledge of Court processes and frontline Social Work. This has enabled existing IROs to reflect upon their practice and learn new skills. Induction periods were implemented in respect of all three members of staff and once again this has provided an opportunity for reflection and an evolution within the IRO team.

#### 4.4 Care Planning Regulations

*The Permanence, Long Term Foster Placements and Ceasing to Look After a Child guidance (March 2015)* has been shared with IROs and discussions have taken place about how it can be used. Specifically it has been used by IROs involved with children in long term placements where they do not wish to be reminded that they are looked after children.

This has provided for a more formal Child Care Review meeting to be held annually, with a more informal consultative Child Care Review in the meantime, ensuring that the views of the child are heard appropriately and that challenge is made where necessary.

Two IROs have used this legislation to good effect and further discussion is due to take place with the South East Regional meetings, members of this group are beginning to review how this legislation has been used and make recommendations.

#### 4.5 Completion of Monitoring Forms.

The aim was to achieve 100% completion of monitoring forms over the year. In the event the following figures were achieved:

Q1 – 62.8% (154/245)  
 Q2 – 61.8% (134/217)  
 Q3 – 63.6% (161/253)  
 Q4 – 69.1% (154/223)

Although it has not yet been possible to achieve 100% completion, it is notable that there is some consistency in the numbers of forms which have been completed during the year. The percentage has risen in the last quarter and it has formed an important part of the induction process for new members of staff.

Discussions have taken place between IROs and Team Managers about the limitations to the form and ways in which it might be improved in line with ongoing processes around Care Planning and review. This would enhance completion rates.

#### 4.6 Distribution of Outcomes and Minutes in timescales

Year	69.4
Q1	59.7
Q2	68.9
Q3	77.0
Q4	72.1

Figure 6 - Minutes distributed in timescale

Regrettably this represents an overall reduction in distribution. It is likely that this can be explained by a rise in numbers of Looked After Children and high caseloads (Figure 2). It is of note that there has been an improvement over the year with a peak in quarter 3 and this is an area which continues to take priority in relation to aims and objectives for 2016-17

#### 4.7 IRO Challenge and use of Dispute Resolution Protocol

A new Dispute Resolution Form was circulated in August 2015 and a Dispute Resolution tab added on LCS, which triggers a notification to be sent to relevant professionals.

Ongoing discussions take place within the IRO service both informally and within team meetings to ensure that there is some clarity and consistency in challenge and dispute resolution.

Discussions have also taken place with Social Workers and Team Managers in relation to individual children and young people as well as picking up general themes and trends.

Well chaired - feel all given opportunity to contribute (Carer)  
 Was a good meeting, well structured (Other support to parent)  
 Recommendations were time lined to give more clarity to meet the objectives (Professional)  
 Well structured - thank you (Carer)

#### 4.8 Participation of Children and Young People in their reviews.

IROs are wholly committed to ensuring participation figures remain high. Children and young people are routinely seen by IROs between reviews to ensure that their views are heard and that they play an active part in care planning and review.

In addition, IROs endeavour to ensure that parents, wider families and carers participate fully in the process.

The IROs work closely with the participation officer to look at other ways children and young people could be encouraged to engage and contribute positively. Discussions are taking place around the use of child friendly forms as well as current technology.

#### 4.9

### 5. IRO case studies

Each IRO has provided a case study to illustrate the difference the service has made. (Please note identifying information has been changed to preserve confidentiality.)

*5.1 "Helen is a 17 year old girl and this is her last review. Her previous IRO has recently left and her new IRO asks her how her time in care has been. Helen says that her IRO has always been consistent and supportive. She says that he would always argue on her behalf and wanted to thank him for all that he had done. She is very positive about her 7 years in care and says that this is down to the fact that she has had one consistent Foster Carer and a good IRO".*

*5.2 The IRO is reviewing Abdul who is a 17 year old asylum seeker. Abdul comments that he has found his IRO very helpful. He says that he has had lots of Social Workers and many issues around changes at school and his claim for asylum. He says that he feels that his IRO has helped move things on positively".*

*5.3 "Brian is 9 years old. He is subject to a Care Order and has until recently been placed in a residential unit. Brian's father, following a protracted period of absence, wanted to have contact with Brian and then proposed resuming care of his son. The IRO worked closely with the Social Worker attending several meetings to discuss the issues and raising the matter with the Service Director. Reviews have been held at more frequent intervals to ensure that the care plan focused on the objective of returning Brian to his father's care. Happily Brian was placed with his father in April and the long term plan is to apply to discharge the Care Order".*

*5.4 "Charlie is 12 years old. The IRO was informed that Charlie would be moving from a residential placement some distance away and was asked for their thoughts. The IRO has a good relationship with Charlie and went to visit him. Charlie was clear that he did not want to be moved and was able to tell his IRO. The IRO liaised with the Social Worker and the manager and it was agreed that Charlie would remain in his placement where he was doing well".*

*5.5 "The IRO was reviewing Victor a 10 month old child. During proceedings the assessments of the parents were negative but in reviews the IRO noted changes in the father and recommended further assessment. Parents were given a second chance. During the process the parents themselves realised that they were not able to care for Victor and they were able to support a plan for adoption and cooperate positively with the life story work".*

5.6 *“Nathanial is an 11 year old boy subject to a Care Order. He was placed in a long term foster placement at a distance from Milton Keynes. Nathanial was moved to carers in the area and the IRO recommended, having spoken to Nathanial about his wishes and feelings, that it would be in his best interests to have more regular contact with his father who, in recent years has settled and has children he cares for with his partner. The IRO has worked closely with the Social Worker and the family. Nathanial now has regular unsupervised contact with his father which is very positive for him and has helped him settle in a new placement”.*

## 6. Objectives for 2016-17

### 6.1 Changes to Team

In order to build greater resilience and flexibility it has been decided that IRO, CPC and LADO responsibilities will be shared more equally within the service. Individuals are already taking steps to develop skills and knowledge in other areas of practice and proposals have been made about how best to ensure a smooth transition of cases in a way which will offer consistency.

### 6.2 Completion and update of Monitoring Forms

The aim is to achieve 100% completion of monitoring forms and to work with social work colleagues and the LCS Team to update the form while ensuring that it continues to be a qualitative document designed to enhance and encourage good practice.

### 6.3 Distribution of Outcomes and Minutes in timescale

The aim is for 100% compliance this year, subject to any external contingencies. Work is ongoing amongst IROs to ensure that outcomes and minutes are completed in a timely fashion.

IROs continue to use Winscribe and to work closely with colleagues in Business Support to ensure that a clear, agreed process is in place to assist with ensuring improved compliance.

### 6.4 IRO challenge and use of Dispute Resolution Protocol

To consolidate and increase the use of Dispute Resolution Protocol where appropriate and continue to record all IRO interventions for the child on LCS.

Further discussions will take place amongst the team to ensure consistency around the use of Dispute Resolution and measure effectiveness and improved outcomes for children.

### 6.5 Participation of Children and Young People in their reviews.

To continue to work with Social Work colleagues and the Participation Officer and members of the Children in Care group, the Children in Care Council (now called 'Our Voice'), as well as other Children in Care forums to ensure that all children and young people participate effectively in care planning and reviews.

### 6.6 Joint Training and Stronger links with Social Work Teams.

IROs will continue to invite colleagues to Team Meetings to discuss mutual challenges in relation to looked after children.

IROs have committed to attending Operational Managers Meetings.

IROs have proposed leading training around Care Planning and Permanence and to participating in joint training with colleagues in the CPT and are committed to progressing this within 2016-17.