

APPENDIX A

LEICESTERSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL
CHILDREN & FAMILY SERVICES
Safeguarding & Improvement Unit

Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Children in Care Annual Report
2014-15

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Executive Summary

- 1.1 The IRO (Independent Reviewing Officer) has a statutory role to ensure effective and improved care planning for children and young people, securing better outcomes, with their wishes and feelings being central and given full and due consideration. (IRO Handbook March 2010).
- 1.2 IROs independently oversee care planning for children and have opportunity to challenge poor decisions and better protect a child's interests.
- 1.3 This report evaluates the extent to which Leicestershire County Council has fulfilled its responsibilities to the children in its care for the period 1st April 2014 – 31st March 2015; including its corporate parenting function.
- 1.4 There are strengths, challenges and areas for improvement as set out below. The report includes priorities for 2015-16 in its appendices.
- 1.5 For the purpose of this report, the term LAC (Looked After Child) will be used for statutory related references to children looked after by the local authority e.g. LAC Reviews and all other references will refer to children in care.
- 1.6 Overall, the IRO Service in Leicestershire is really pleased with what it has achieved over the last year and is confident that it has operated to a high standard and met statutory requirements. The vision moving forward is one of excellence and the improvements identified in this report will help build on what has been achieved and is working well to enhance the service even further.
- 1.7 **Strengths – What is working well?**
 - 99.1% of the 1292 Reviews were carried out within the prescribed timescale a further improvement on the previous two years already good performance. (98.8% and 98% respectively).
 - Increased numbers of children participating in their Reviews again this year, from 91% in 2013-14 to 92.5% 2014-15 (was 88.5% in 2012-13)
 - Improvements in IRO contact with and visits to children and recording of this including children placed at a distance.
 - Wealth of experience, expertise and knowledge across the IRO Service with ability to offer consultation in a number of lead areas including Children Using Sexually Abusive Behaviour, Mental Health, Youth Offending/Remand/Secure Accommodation.
 - All IROs have been trained in Signs of Safety and have championed this approach in their dual role.

- IRO Service Regional and National links and training and development opportunities.
- IRO Service links with Cafcass and representation on Family Justice Board and Performance sub-group and opportunity for influence in care proceedings.
- Strengthened working relationships and effective, collaborative working and peer challenge between IRO Service and Service Managers in Children's Social Care.
- IRO Challenge activity including challenge meetings between the IRO Service managers and Assistant Director. IROs have a clear and direct route to the Director in those situations where resolution with the Assistant Director is not achieved.
- IRO Service attendance and involvement at Joint Solutions and Permanency Forum, Education of Children in Care meetings and with the Specialist LAC health team and Early Years partners.

1.8 **Challenges – What are we worried about?**

- How current capacity within the IRO Service impacts on IROs being able to consistently comply with the regulatory requirements of the IRO handbook:

There has been some deterioration since the last reporting period, of IROs being able to consistently complete and distribute decisions and records from LAC reviews within timescales.

IROs aspire to increase further the practice of ensuring that they speak with/visit children privately and individually prior to each review especially those placed at a distance.

- The need to further promote IRO voice/presence in court proceedings
- More consistently meeting good standards of practice around processes for children coming into care and their first Review to build on the achievements made in this respect over 2014-15.

1.9 **Areas for Improvement – What needs to happen?**

- Development of an evaluation tool to gain feedback about the quality and experience for young people of their Review and the IRO Service.
- Further work between locality social work services and the IRO Service, to build on the good progress that has been made over 2014-15, to more fully achieve consistent standards of practice around quality and timeliness of preparation for Review, including timeliness of notifications to the IRO Service of children coming into care.

- Improved placement sufficiency and suitability to support more stability and permanency options for children and young people.
- New care planning documentation that compliments the developments being made in placement commissioning and is congruent with a Signs of Safety approach.
- Further strengthening of the IRO escalation process so the independent voice of the IRO continues to challenge and evidence impact on improved outcomes for children and young people in care.

2.0 Introduction

- 2.1 This Annual Report is a requirement of 'The IRO Handbook - Statutory guidance for independent reviewing officers and local authorities on their functions in relation to case management and review of looked after children' (March 2010). The content and format follows the prescription set out in the guidance; the report will comply with the expectation that it will be available for scrutiny by the Corporate Parenting Board, as well as accessible as a public document and most importantly, communicated to Leicestershire's children in care in a child and young person friendly version.
- 2.2 The report outlines the contribution made by the IRO Service in Leicestershire, to the quality assurance and improvement of services for children and young people in the care of the County Council during the year April 2014 to March 2015. It evaluates how effectively the service and the Local Authority have fulfilled their responsibilities to Leicestershire's children in care over this period, including performance in relation to the Local Authority's corporate parenting function in seeking to achieve best outcomes.
- 2.3 The report is an opportunity to pinpoint areas of good practice and those in need of development and improvement, providing information that can contribute to the strategic plans of the local authority. It highlights emerging themes and trends, and details areas of work which the service has prioritised during the year, including progress on the areas of development that were identified from the 2014-15 IRO Service Annual Work Programme, as set out in Appendix 1.
- 2.4 Priorities for the current year 2015-16 are set out in Appendix 2.

3.0 Purpose of IRO Service and Context

- 3.1 The appointment of an IRO is a legal requirement under S118 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002, their role being to protect children's interests throughout the care planning process, ensure their voice is heard and challenge the local authority where needed in order to achieve best outcomes.
- 3.2 The effectiveness of the role has rightly been subject to scrutiny since its inception and the legal framework and statutory guidance was revised in 2010 to support a strengthened position. This is set out in the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 (amended 2015) and the IRO Handbook 2010.
- 3.3 The role of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) is essential to the quality assurance and effectiveness of the looked after experience of children and young people, not just on an individual basis but collectively too, with IROs having a key part to play in monitoring the

performance of the Local Authority as a Corporate Parent; drawing out themes for improvement and development and helping to drive forward change.

- 3.4 The regulations clearly specify circumstances when the local authority should consult with the IRO; when there are proposed significant changes to the care plan including changes of placement, change of education plan or serious incident. IROs are a key part of decision making processes for children and young people's care and permanence planning.
- 3.5 Should IROs have concerns about the conduct of the local authority in relation to its provision for a child in care, they have the power to refer cases to the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (section 26 of the 1989 Children Act as amended by the 2002 Act) who could consider bringing proceedings for breaches of the child's human rights, judicial review and other proceedings.
- 3.6 To support IROs in their challenge role, the statutory framework recognises the need for access to independent legal advice and supports that this should be in place.
- 3.7 Expectations of the quality and effectiveness of the IRO Service have continued to increase over the period covered by this report, evident within the findings of national research - *The role of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) in England (NCB March 2014)* as well as Ofsted inspections of other local authorities.

4.0 IRO Service

- 4.1 Although IROs are appointed by the local authority, the regulations are very clear that they must be independent from the immediate line management of the case – this is significant in terms of the challenge and scrutiny role.
- 4.2 The IRO Service in Leicestershire is sited within the Safeguarding & Improvement Unit (SIU), part of Children's Social Care (CSC), which sits within the Children and Family Services (CFS). Whilst part of CSC, it remains independent of the line management of resources for children in care and the operational social work teams.
- 4.3 There is a continuing national debate regarding how truly effective IROs can be when they are employed directly by the local authority and recommendations have been made to look to employ IROs outside the local authority (House of Lords Committee on Adoption Reform - 2013). This has not to date been agreed by the Government and commitments continue in order to make the role work within the current arrangements – recognising that the true test of independence is IROs ability to challenge and operate in an environment that allows for this.

- 4.4 In this context, the effective independence of the IRO Service in Leicestershire continues to be monitored and considered across the IRO management team and the position remains that overall, independence is not felt to be compromised, supported by evidence of challenge and support for this at senior levels within the authority.
- 4.5 The siting of IROs within CSC is one that is viewed by the service as beneficial overall as it enables IROs: to have a good understanding of the local authority and the context in which they operate; to have direct access to case records and therefore full information relating to a child's case; to build constructive working relationships with social work teams which aids good information sharing and partnerships and to have oversight of the strengths and needs of the department that in turn enables contributions to improvement activity for the benefit of children in care.
- 4.6 The structure of the SIU has seen a number of changes since its inception in 1997 with the last major restructure taking place over 2011-12 which facilitated a strengthened and enhanced IRO and management function, (referenced in the 2012-13 annual report) including increased capacity, in recognition of the need for the IRO Service to respond to a number of national and local drivers.
- 4.7 Since then, the SIU has become increasingly involved in managing and coordinating responses to a number of high profile complex abuse investigations, including contributing to strategic and operational developments to improve the local response to child sexual exploitation, trafficking and missing children.
- 4.8 A new and separate resource has been established to support this work – Multi Agency Child Sexual Exploitation and Missing Team – a departmental priority over the last year. The skills, knowledge and experience of staff within the IRO Service enabled this project to take place with staff from the service being seconded into new specialist roles. This has meant further changes for the IRO service and configuration of the IRO management team which has brought a new set of challenges as regards capacity. Arrangements have been put into place at the beginning of 2015-16, to enable this to be resolved permanently.
- 4.9 The IRO Service has two Team Managers with lead responsibilities for children in care and child protection respectively who manage the team of IROs; the SIU Service Manager has lead responsibility for the IRO Service.
- 4.10 The IRO Service has a diverse mix of staff to reflect the make-up of the children in care population, across age, sexual orientation as well as ethnicity. The gender balance is heavily female weighted which is less representative and whereas opportunities to redress this have

continued to be taken where possible through recruitment, the most significant consideration is having the right skills and experience.

4.11 Collectively, the IRO team has many years of social work and management experience, professional expertise and knowledge and there are a number who have developed more specialist roles during the course of their time in the service and are able to offer consultation in areas including but not confined to:

- *CUSAB (Children Using Sexually Abusive Behaviour)*
- *Therapeutic support services*
- *Children with disabilities and complex care needs*
- *Youth Offending/Remand/Secure Accommodation*
- *Mental Health*
- *UASC (Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children)*
- *PREVENT*

All IROs have had generic as well as more bespoke training in Signs of Safety, relevant to their role – this has included in depth residential training opportunities for some with the chance for more to take advantage of this into the later part of 2015.

4.12 In addition, there are links with the Children in Care Council (CiCC) and Participation Officer for Children in Care and Care Leavers as well as the Corporate Parenting Board.

4.13 Two IROs have worked closely with the CiCC over the reporting period to produce new and improved consultation documents with the aim of supporting more effective participation of children and young people in their Care Planning and Reviews - crucial in relation to their voice being listened to, heard and influential.

4.14 Continuing challenges with capacity in the IRO service has meant a need to guard carefully against IROs undertaking too many additional duties and extended responsibilities that are not specified in the statutory guidance for the role, yet create a balance that allows for an enhanced skill set that can contribute to quality and improvement developments.

4.15 As is the established case in Leicestershire, there are IRO Services in other local authorities that have a dual role and undertake their statutory functions as outlined in the IRO Handbook, as well as the chairing of all Child Protection Conferences (CPCs) convened in the authority. However, there are a number of authorities that have chosen to separate out these functions as they have interpreted the chairing of child protection conferences as additional duties that could detract from the priority given to children in care.

- 4.16 The approach taken in Leicestershire is mostly but not universally seen as a benefit in relation to the continuity it provides to children and young people on their journey through the child protection process and into the care system (*The role of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) in England - NCB March 2014*). Such an approach allows flexibility within the team and provides more effective oversight across children's situations and the service provided from the IRO team to Child Protection as well as Children in Care has continued to be given equal priority and status.
- 4.17 At a regional IRO seminar held in March 2014 the Ofsted representative advised that Ofsted do not favour any particular model or configuration of IRO Services; the focus of their judgment remains on its quality and effectiveness.
- 4.18 To date, there have been no plans to change the configuration of the IRO Service in Leicestershire but specialist Signs of Safety developments in the child protection conference processes over 2014-15, alongside the growing demands on IROs to make a difference for outcomes for children in care has required this to be considered again. Consideration of the best way to deliver these functions and use resources to best affect needs to take place over 2015-16.
- 4.19 The make-up of the IRO team has seen some changes over the reporting period. Whilst retaining a core, more established membership, it has welcomed some new permanent staff but been impacted by staff secondments and extended periods of sick leave by several staff, with Q3 (October – December 2014) the hardest hit. Additional agency IROs have been a necessity in order to be able to continue to deliver the core business which has been a significant challenge at various periods especially the latter half of 2014-15.
- 4.21 At the time of writing, the IRO service is operating with 11.15 FTE IROs (+ 0.5 FTE recent vacancy). This includes 4 agency IROs, 3 of whom have minimal involvement with children in care work and focus mainly on the child protection conference chairing role. Careful consideration is given to the type of work allocated to temporary staff within the team in order to continue to support sufficient priority being given to consistent professional relationships with children, young people, their families and carers.
- 4.22 Caseloads for IROs (FTE) with the current staff complement averages approximately 80 which is a better position than the 2013-14 period but still over the recommended guidelines as per the IRO Handbook (50-70)
- 4.23 The issue of sufficiency within the IRO Service (a regional and national test, not just experienced in Leicestershire) has been formally considered and acknowledged by DMT over the period this report

covers and at the time of writing, discussions around ensuring capacity, continue to take place with senior leaders.

- 4.24 The expectations on IROs are significant and the IRO Service in Leicestershire remains committed to delivering a high quality service for children in care. In order for them to continue to encompass their full responsibilities and contribute to improved outcomes on an individual as well as collective basis, the resources to deliver need to be in place.

5.0 Quantitative Information

- 5.1 The children in care population in Leicestershire has seen further growth over the 2014-15 period in comparison to the previous two years, which has meant further demand on the IRO Service as well as locality social work teams and Placements Service; the overall number increased by 18 from year end 2014 to 474 at the year end March 31st 2015. **See Table 1 in Appendix 4**
- 5.2 Between 1st April 2014 and 31st March 2015, a total of 1292 review meetings for children were held. The figures in the table do not show the adoption reviews for previous years (adoption work has only been inputted into Fwi in the latter part of 2014-15 so is now able to be included in electronic reports run) but they were included in the annual reporting last year and made the total 1283 which is just less than this year. **See Table 2 in Appendix 4**
- 5.3 On time LAC Reviews support focused and timely care planning for children, help secure permanency - avoiding unnecessary delay and assist in the completion of actions aimed at delivering best outcomes. Of the LAC Reviews held over 2014-15, 1281 (99.1%) were held within the prescribed timescales. This is an excellent achievement and represents further improvement on the good performance in the previous two periods of 98.8% and 98%.
- 5.4 The performance in relation to timely LAC Reviews is down to clarity of expectation and a robust system that supports this within the SIU, across IROs, managers and administrative support. A continued flexible approach, treating the review as a process rather than a meeting is another way that the IRO Service works with locality teams to ensure reviews take place within timescale.
- 5.5 Of the 1292 reviews undertaken over 2014-15, 83 (6%) were done in more than 1 part compared to 3% in 2013-14. It is recognised that the review process has to be flexible and take account of the individual needs of the child/young person concerned. This flexibility is helpful both in terms of meeting timescales as well as attendance and participation of young people and their family, carers and professionals. Some reviews will appropriately be held as one stand-alone meeting, others, to suit the circumstances, may be better suited to a number of

meetings. The IRO considers the best approach in consultation with social workers and children and young people.

- 5.6 Notwithstanding the benefits a flexible approach to reviews can bring, there is a need to ensure it continues to be used for the right reasons moving forward and not as a fallback due to lack of adherence to timescales – robust application of the timescales for reviews will continue to be adopted in the SIU.
- 5.7 Of the 11 LAC reviews that did not take place on time over 2014-15 (0.9%) the main reasons relate to communication issues between locality social work teams and IRO Service (both ways on some occasions) as well as attendance issues on one occasion and also lack of notification to SIU that child has come into care coupled with lack of data entered onto Frameworki (Fwi) so this was not picked up until out of date (28 day – 1st LAC Review). On the whole this is an improved picture compared to 2013-14 reasons and offers some reassurance that actions taken to address repeat issues from previous reporting periods have seen some success.

5.8 Participation

- 5.8.1 Children's voice should be at the centre of their care planning and engaging their participation in their Looked After Review process is crucial in ensuring the influence this has when making plans for their future.
- 5.8.2 The participation figures for this period represents the percentage of children and young people aged 4 and over who communicated their views in some way, for their review. **See Table 3 in Appendix 4**

Participation is defined across 7 different indicators:

- PN1 Children who attend their reviews and speak for themselves;
- PN2 Those who attend but communicate via an advocate;
- PN3 Those who attend and convey their views non verbally;
- PN4 Those who attend but don't contribute;
- PN5 Children who do not attend but brief someone to speak on their behalf;
- PN6 Do not attend but communicate their views by another method;
- PN7 Those who do not attend/convey their views in any other way.
- PN0 Represents children under the age of 4

- 5.8.3 The participation figures for 2014-2015 have seen a further increase to 92.5% from 91% in 2013-14 and 88.5% the year previous which is positive progress in relation to the focus that this has been given in the IRO service.
- 5.8.4 As per the recommendation arising out of last year's annual report a system has been put into place that includes monthly reporting and

monitoring by IRO managers and admin support – this has contributed to improvement but it is recognised that there is still room for better performance and it is anticipated that use of newly developed consultation and participation documentation designed in conjunction with children and young people will further assist into 2015-16.

- 5.8.5 IROs continue to strive to build meaningful relationships with children and young people, recognising that these relationships are at the heart of good practice and achieving best outcomes. IROs have worked hard over 2014-15 to meet the requirement for them to speak with/visit children privately and individually prior to each review – sometimes this is able to take place well in advance but other times this will be just prior to the review and it is recognised that for children placed at a distance this is more of a challenge.
- 5.8.6 This challenge was highlighted in November 2014, when the IRO Service had the benefit of being part of an external consultation exercise and one of the recommendations for improvement to come out of this was in relation to contact with and visits to children placed at a distance. The Service has endeavored to make progress in this area and whereas it remains a challenge there are some very good practice examples of IROs travelling some distances to engage children and young people and seek their views around their care plans; views that have certainly influenced the way meetings have been planned and conducted as well as impact on care planning.
- 5.8.7 A monthly reporting system has been set up with Placements Service whereby IRO managers are given updates as to which children are placed at a distance so there is better oversight and opportunity to ensure that IROs are engaged with these children – this work is undertaken in conjunction with the Children's Rights Officer for Children in Care.
- 5.8.8 IROs have the facility to record their contact with and visits to children and young people on Fwi and it has been possible over this reporting period to access reports in the system that help to reflect this activity. It is a very simple portrayal that in the first instance has allowed for a basic idea of what progress is being made by the IRO Service in this area of responsibility but needs refining further and taking in context with other performance data in order to be more useful moving forward.

Case note type - IRO Visit to Child recorded

Q1 2013/14 - 7 visits
Q2 2013/14 - 11 visits
Q3 2013/14 – 16 visits
Q4 2013/14 – 7 visits

Q1 2014/15 - 35 visits
Q2 2014/15 - 36 visits
Q3 2014/15 – 16 visits
Q4 2014/15 – 22 visits

Total 2013/14 = 41

Total 2014/15 = 109

Case note type - IRO Contact with Child recorded

Q1 2013/14 - 15 contacts
Q2 2013/14 - 25 contacts
Q3 2013/14 – 17 contacts
Q4 2013/14 – 10 contacts

Q1 2014/15 - 19 contacts
Q2 2014/15 - 23 contacts
Q3 2014/15 – 32 contacts
Q4 2014/15 – 65 contacts

Total 2013/14 = 67

Total 2014/15 = 139

- 5.8.9 Despite there being noted improvements in the recording of IRO visits and contact to date, there are still a number of null returns for this data field which highlights the need for more consistent recording as well as increased activity. However, whereas over 80% of records did not detail this information back in May 2014, the most recent data set in February 2015 has by comparison a 33.9% null return – an improvement of almost 46%. The challenge over 2015/16 will be to reduce this further.
- 5.8.10 One of the areas of work identified in the 2014-15 Work Plan was to develop an evaluation tool to gain feedback about the quality and experience for young people of their Review and the IRO Service; to better understand the impact of young people’s participation and their voice and the difference it makes for their outcomes. This action was part of a wider piece of work to improve the range of consultation tools available for children and young people and whereas some of this has been achieved (See Appendix 1) there are still elements that have been delayed that are being taken forward into 2015-16.

6.0 Qualitative Information

- 6.1 The 2013-14 IRO Annual Report, identified priority areas for improvement and action by the IRO Service for 2014-15 in the Annual Work Programme. **Appendix 1** illustrates performance against that.

7.0 Conduct of the organisation in relation to the review and the case, including any resource issues that are putting at risk the delivery of a quality service for Children in Care.

- 7.1 Over the reporting period, the Acting Service Manager for the IRO Service has worked closely and collaboratively with peer Service Managers for locality social work teams and Placement Service in order to ensure the most effective working relationships in recognition of how this is at the centre of achieving the best outcomes for our children in care. Peer challenge has been positively embraced and this approach has been greatly beneficial in addressing a number of areas of practice needing improvement that there had been limited progress with previously.

- 7.2 Timeliness of notifications to the IRO Service of children coming into care to support strong practices and performance around care planning and LAC Review processes has been a continuing challenge, although this is definitely moving in the right direction and has seen gradually improving performance over the Quarters in 2014-15 with 59% of notifications within required timescales in Q4 compared to Q1, Q2 and Q3 which was 47%, 50% & 48% respectively. There is still progress to be made and this will be taken forward into 2015-16.
- 7.3 The statutory Review meeting is the forum where care and permanency planning for children is carefully considered and overseen by the IRO and in order for this to be most effective, evidence of the assessment and thinking on which the plan is formulated, along with the plan itself, needs to be made available in advance to the IRO along with all relevant reports.
- 7.4 Performance in this respect has featured as a recommended area for improvement by the operational service in the last 2 annual reports. **Tables 4 and 4a in Appendix 4** show the comparison between 2013/14 and 2014/15 and it can be seen that progress has been made but still needs improvement.
- 7.5 In July 2014, as part of the Entitlements Inquiry for children in care and care leavers, the Participation Officer for children in care undertook a survey with a group of 43 children that sought a view from them as to whether they were aware of the existence of their care plan, whether it included their views and whether they felt important decisions were taken without their involvement. Additionally they were asked if they got opportunity to speak with their social worker alone. The results were very positive and support that there is some very good practice in place across CSC. The majority of children said that they were aware of their care plan and that it included their views; the majority felt that they were included in decision making about them and all but one young person advised that they got to see their social worker alone.
- 7.6 There are plans in place to change the current care plan tool and approach for children and young people, to make it more fit for purpose as regards; commissioning services that meet children's assessed individual needs and bringing more accountability as to how these will be met in the short, medium and long term. This work needs to be aligned with developments that have already taken place with other LAC Review documentation to incorporate Signs of Safety methodology and support a move towards LAC reviews being managed in that way.
- 7.7 There has been a collaborative focus over 2014-15 across the IRO Service, Nominated Officer for the Local Authority and Agency Decision Maker (ADM) to improve understanding across locality social work teams of the quality assurance responsibilities these roles have

for children in care and how this fits with achieving permanency for children avoiding unnecessary delay. This work has further helped to raise the profile of the IRO and the importance of good working relationships and communication with social workers for children in care and their plans. There are still some instances of IROs not being notified of significant changes or event in a child's life including changes to their care plan but there are in contrast numerous examples of good practice whereby IROs have worked very closely and consistently with practitioners to address issues and achieve good outcomes for children and young people. The role of the IRO is much better understood than previously and more integrated into the thinking of workers and managers at all levels.

- 7.8 Over 2014-15 there has been a focus on achieving permanency and ensuring robust and timely processes for children and young people are followed. This has required both locality social work teams and IROs to take stock of their practice and make the necessary changes to support this. The joint action plan for care and permanency planning has underpinned this work and some of the aspects of this action plan that have been delivered over this period have contributed to positive improvements.
- 7.9 Work has been undertaken through the Joint Solutions and Permanency Forum to know exactly who our children in care are and out of the cohort at any one time to understand and verify which children have achieved permanency; those who have nearly achieved it; those who do/do not have an identified permanence plan and those who are in their transition to independent living. It is really positive that the first permanency celebrations have taken place in this period for children and their carers whose long term fostering placements have been matched where required and ratified through their review process. This approach continues into 2015-16.
- 7.10 The role of the IRO Service in the Joint Solutions and Permanency Forum has continued to contribute to influencing best outcomes for children at an individual case level as well as in relation to service planning and developments for children in care.
- 7.11 IROs have continued to endeavour to exercise their challenge and influence role to the fullest over the last year and despite the demands on the service that have been highlighted already in the report, they have been active in this part of their role on a formal basis as well as informal. The data taken from IRO recording on Fwi demonstrates a comparison for 2014/15 to that captured in 2013/14. Currently this is the case note type that is used by IROs to capture a challenge – it is acknowledged that this needs to be revised and a clear case note type for IRO Challenge will be of more benefit.

Case note type - IRO View recorded

Q1 2013/14 - 12 records
Q2 2013/14 - 16 records
Q3 2013/14 – 28 records
Q4 2013/14 – 19 records

Q1 2014/15 - 34 records
Q2 2014/15 - 65 records
Q3 2014/15 – 59 records
Q4 2014/15 – 58 records

Total = 75

Total = 216

The caveat for this information is that it is not the sole means of capturing data around challenge but gives an indication of the progression in the Service.

7.12 There have been eight challenge meetings between the IRO Service and Assistant Director over 2014-15 and a total of 22 children and young people discussed. Some issues have been resolved swiftly whilst others have been more complex and have taken longer to progress to a satisfactory conclusion.

7.13 Overall, the issues of concern requiring challenge over this period have included:

- Unnecessary delays in numerous aspects of care and permanency planning and progression including delay in commencing care proceedings.
- Disagreements around proposed care and permanency plans
- Disagreements around type of placement and concerns about suitability of placements.
- Change of plans without IRO involvement
- Lack of response to IRO challenge
- Delays incurred as a result of agreements around financial packages
- Staying Put challenges
- Pre-proceedings not sufficiently robust
- Lack of robust rehabilitation planning
- Lack of permanency/forward/transition plan.

Placement choice and sufficiency has also been a concern; this is a recognised issue within CSC and one that has been responded to during the transformations that have taken place over the year. It is hoped that the changes that have taken place in the Placements and Commissioning Service will address this moving forward.

7.14 As in previous reporting periods, none of the challenge cases considered this year have culminated in formal referral to Cafcass in relation to Judicial Review, as challenges have been ultimately resolved or on track to be at the time of writing. Reflection on these has led to the identification of areas where IROs need to be more

consistently robust and less lenient in their approach. It is a balance to strike and the IRO Service will give careful consideration to this moving forward, given the potential benefits to using this approach in complex and stuck situations in order to secure a resolution for children and young people at the earliest opportunity.

- 7.15 Even though formal Cafcass referrals have not been necessary, there is a continuing, mostly positive working relationship between the IRO Service and Cafcass, under the umbrella of the Cafcass Protocol and this is aided by good links being established between IRO and Cafcass managers over the last year. There are plans in place to further enhance this over the coming year and review the effectiveness of the protocol, with networking opportunities being set up between IROs and Children's Guardians – the first one is scheduled for July 2015.
- 7.16 IROs have effective access to Independent Legal Advice and have used this to support their challenges for 5 children and young people over 2014-15 compared to 1 over 2013-14.
- 7.17 One of the themes to come out of the challenge work of IROs is their lack of direct voice in court/care proceedings as they are not party to proceedings and largely reliant on their views being represented (unless requested directly by the court) via the children's guardian and/or the local authority – this does not work effectively enough when there is a difference of view/dispute around the care plan. This issue has been raised with HHJ Bellamy who has acknowledged the dilemma and agreed to meet with the IRO Service Manager to discuss local arrangements including presentation at Family Justice Board for Judges and Magistrates on the role of the IRO.
- 7.18 Despite many occasions over 2014-15 where IROs have taken up successful challenges on behalf of children and young people in care, there needs to be an acknowledgement that there have also been missed opportunities whereby IROs have not been sufficiently robust and this has meant resolutions for children and young people taking longer on some occasions with the risk of unnecessary delay. This needs to reduce over 2015-16 and it is hoped that with sufficient resources IROs will be in a better position to pick up all required challenges. Strong management oversight and quality assurance activity will assist.
- 7.19 The IRO Service needs to do some further work over 2015-16, reviewing the escalation process and making it more fit for purpose. Some issues arose over 2014-15 that identified a need for a clearer more robust approach and one that was less generic. Alongside this there is a need to review the current arrangements for how challenge work is captured and evidenced, with clear demonstration around impact and outcomes.

- 7.20 The IRO Service has continued to benefit from strong links with partners in health and education for the benefit of children in care and arrangements remain in place for regular attendance of key representatives from these services at IRO team meetings. IRO Service representation at both education and health strategic groups continues.
- 7.21 The IRO Service has worked closely with LAC Nurses and the Designated Nurse for Looked After Children in relation to improving performance and take up of timely Initial and Review Health Assessments as well as commencing use of Leaving Care Health Summaries in 2015-16.
- 7.22 Links with Early Years services have continued to be good and the IRO Service has worked with them over this period to promote opportunities for pre-school children in care to receive support and experience of nursery provision and Early Years PEPs, to give them the best chances with their peers when they start school.
- 7.23 Regional and National IRO Service and IRO Manager relationships have developed positively over the last 6 months of the reporting period and the IRO Service in Leicestershire has taken full advantage of regional, tailored training and networking opportunities. This has been invaluable as regards furthering knowledge to support the role as well as sharing good practice across regional and national peers and keeping abreast of developments and government thinking around the role of the IRO and how this can be used to best effect.

8.0 Recommended areas for improvement by the operational service

- Improved timeliness to IRO Service from locality social work teams (within 2 working days) of notifications of children new into care – performance issues where relevant will be shared with Service Managers to address with teams.
- Further work between the IRO Service and the locality social work teams to improve quality and timeliness of preparation for LAC reviews. This includes availability of relevant documentation for IROs. See Appendix 3 section 2 for IRO Service actions required.
- Continued efforts to ensure effective and consistent communication with IROs as regards all aspects of care and permanency planning for children and young people.
- Revised Care Plan documentation needed.
- Improved placement sufficiency and suitability to support stability and permanency.

9.0 Annual work programme of the IRO service i.e. priority areas for improvement and action in the IRO service in the coming year 2015-16.

See Appendix 2 attached

Judith Jones
Service Manager
Safeguarding & Improvement Unit
June 2015

Appendix 1

IRO Service 2014-15 Annual Work Programme Performance and Outcomes

	ACTION	WHO	WHEN	RAG	COMMENTARY
1)	Risk assessment to consider sufficiency of capacity in IRO Service	SIU Service Manager	June 2014	G	<p>The IRO Service – Taking up the Challenge Report was considered at DMT in June 2014 with the recommendation that in order for the service to have sufficiency then a number of additional IROs were needed.</p> <p>A further paper outlining budget considerations was tabled in August 2014.</p> <p>At the time of writing, discussions to further progress sufficiency in the IRO Service continue.</p>
2)	Achieve consistency of approach across IRO Team using observation tool, peer review and audit.	IRO Managers and IROs	Dec 2014	G	<p>Consistency of approach across the IRO team is an ongoing activity that has been supported over the reporting period by IRO managers adopting continuous improvement practices and activity including learning from practice observation and audit; having good management oversight; setting clear standards and expectations. IROs have undertaken some peer review that has contributed to consistency of approach but more systematic application is needed over 2015-16 (should capacity allow) to gain most benefit.</p>

	ACTION	WHO	WHEN	RAG	COMMENTARY
3)	Realise IRO Handbook full implementation	IRO Managers	See detail in Appendix 3	A	See details in Appendix 3 – there are still some outstanding aspects that have not been possible to progress as a result of demand on the service over reporting period.
4)	Embed Growing Safety methodology and approach into LAC Reviews	IRO Managers with SoS Project Team and IROs	March 2015	G	<p>Through the implementation of Signs of Safety (SoS) Child Protection Conferences over 2014-15, IROs have enhanced their skill in SoS methodology and approach so are well set up to take this forward into LAC reviews. Towards the end of this reporting period, report templates to and from LAC reviews have been changed so that they are now SoS congruent and a small group of IROs with the support of IRO team manager are piloting Signs of Safety Style LAC reviews.</p> <p>The learning from this will be taken forward with a clear implementation plan over 2015-16.</p>
5)	Complete Care Planning & Review developments	IRO Managers and CSC	July 2014	G	<p>A joint IRO/CSC care and permanency planning action plan was drawn up in response to this previously outstanding piece of work and has been driven forward over 2014-15 with some success and good collaborative working. There is oversight by Improvement Board and at the time of writing consideration is being given to the evidence of impact of this work.</p> <p>This work has included the development of flowcharts that have become part of the permanence toolkit for social workers to aid understanding of permanency systems and processes</p>

	ACTION	WHO	WHEN	RAG	COMMENTARY
					<p>for children and the role of the IRO in this.</p> <p>New consultation documents for children and young people have been developed in conjunction with the Children in Care Council and basic Coming into Care packs have been established and use commenced.</p> <p>There are further actions that will be undertaken into 2015-16 to build on and refine the work that has already been achieved (See Appendix 2)</p>
6)	More consistent and increased use of recording on Fwi by IROs to evidence their role and challenge.	IRO Managers & IROs	Through quarterly reporting	G	This has been achieved as is highlighted in the body of the report (5.8.8, 5.8.9 & 7.11) but there is still room for further improvement moving forward.
7)	Refine systems for capturing evidence of quality and impact of IRO Service including user feedback	IRO Managers & IROs	September 2014	A	This work is linked into what has been achieved so far as regards new participation and consultation documents (referenced at 5.8.10). It has not been possible to complete this aspect of the wider work over the reporting period in addition to the other pieces of development work within the IRO Service but this will carry forward into the work programme for 2015-16 (see Appendix 2).

	ACTION	WHO	WHEN	RAG	COMMENTARY
8)	Wider use of Beacon website as a platform for consultation and participation	Beacon Development Team with IRO Manager	Initial phase by September 2014	R	It has not been possible to commit resources to the Beacon website in order to make full and effective use of it over 2014-15 but this will be carried forward into 2015-16 (see Appendix 2).
9)	Establish IRO specialist role for Care Leavers and SYPAC link.	IRO	July 2014	R	IRO identified but demand on service has meant that the focus has had to be on delivering core business and it has not been possible to prioritise additional responsibilities – carry forward to 2015-16.
10)	Further improve participation performance	IRO Managers & IROs with locality social work teams	March 2015	G	Achieved as highlighted in body of report (5.8.3)
11)	Establish IRO Service link with Family Justice Board and VOICE of young people in care	IRO Managers and young people	July 2014	G	IRO Manager now sits on LFJB and is also a member of LFJB performance sub group. Piece of work undertaken in 2014-15 with chair of LFJB and young people in care to raise profile of young people's voice and experience of care proceedings at LFJB – opportunities in place to influence Public Law Outline developments to secure better experience and outcomes for children.

	ACTION	WHO	WHEN	RAG	COMMENTARY
12)	Increase challenge – need to improve influence at service and strategic level not just individual case	IRO Service with Assistant Director	Monthly	G	<p>Regular challenge meetings have taken place over the reporting period where high profile and cases of concern have been considered and actions taken to resolve situations for children and young people with the aim of progressing their care plans and achieving good outcomes.</p> <p>Focus has been on individual children and young people as well as common themes and issues around practice being identified and actions taken to address. This has not been confined to CSC but has included partners within and outside LCC.</p>

Appendix 2

IRO Service 2015-2016 Annual Work Programme

	ACTION	WHO	WHEN	RAG	COMMENTARY
1)	Achieve sufficient capacity in the IRO Service so that caseloads are within the IRO Handbook recommendations (50-70)	IRO Service Manager with DMT	By end of Q2 2015-16		At time of writing (June 2015) discussions planned between IRO Manager and Assistant Director.
2)	Systematic and methodical peer and manager review system to be adopted to support consistency of approach and continuous improvement in IRO Service	IRO Managers and IROs	To commence in Q3 2015-16		Ability to successfully implement will rely on (1) in this plan being achieved.
3)	Implement outstanding elements of IRO Handbook	IRO Managers and IROs	See Appendix 3		
4)	Achieve a Signs of Safety LAC Review service	IRO Managers with SoS Project Team and IROs	March 2016		

	ACTION	WHO	WHEN	RAG	COMMENTARY
5)	<p>Build on Care Planning and Review developments achieved over 2014-15 including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Completion of suite of flowcharts for social workers to support practice in relation to permanency options for children and young people other than adoption. • Refine and add to Coming into Care packs 	IRO Service with CSC, key partners & Comms.	By end of Q2 2015-16		At time of writing a long term fostering flowchart is in draft and work is underway on a child friendly complaints process leaflet that will be included in the Coming into Care packs.
6)	<p>Further reduce null returns as regards recording on Fwi by IROs of their visits and contact with children (as per section 5.8.9 of the report). Work with business intelligence and performance team to ensure that the data reflects an accurate story of the work undertaken around participation (5.8.8)</p>	IRO Service and Business Intelligence and Performance Team	By Q3 2015-16		Would look for evidence of improved performance by this timescale

	ACTION	WHO	WHEN	RAG	COMMENTARY
7)	Develop an evaluation tool and begin to gain feedback about the quality and experience for young people of their Review and the IRO Service.	IRO Service	In place by end of Q2 2015-16		
8)	Effective use of Beacon website including as a platform for consultation, participation & evaluation.	IRO & EH Service Managers with The Jitty and Beacon Development Team rep.	March 2016		Initial meeting scheduled for 23 rd June 2015.
9)	Establish IRO specialist role for Care Leavers and SYPAC link if capacity in IRO Service is able to accommodate.	IRO	Ideally, with immediate effect		IRO has been identified.
10)	Raise profile of IRO and ensure voice of IRO is heard in court in care proceedings	IRO Manager with Cafcass Manager and HHJ Bellamy	By end of Q2 2015-16		Meeting with HHJ Bellamy scheduled for July 2015 and plans in place for presentation re IRO role to be made at FJB meeting following this.

	ACTION	WHO	WHEN	RAG	COMMENTARY
11)	Review case note type nomenclature on Fwi for IRO Challenge recording	IRO Manager with Fwi link	By end of June 2016.		
12)	New Care Plan documentation to support a commissioning approach and embrace Signs of Safety methodology.	Across IRO Service, Commissioning Development lead and Principal Social Worker.	Established by March 2016.		
13)	Ensure compliance with new guidance and regulations – Working Together 2015 & The Care Planning and Fostering (Miscellaneous Amendments) (England) Regulations 2015	IRO Managers	From 1 st April 2015		Some of the changes are adopted practice in Leicestershire already; the remaining implications are being considered across the CSC Service Manager group.
14)	Review Escalation Process and how challenge is more systematically captured and evidenced.	IRO Managers	In Q2 2015-16		

	ACTION	WHO	WHEN	RAG	COMMENTARY
15)	IROs to be more consistently robust and less lenient as regards their challenge role.	IROs with IRO manager support	Embed further across 2015-16		

Appendix 3

IRO Handbook Implementation Plan – Outstanding areas

	REQUIREMENT	ACTION	WHO	WHEN	RAG	COMMENTARY
1)	Children and young people to be given information re IRO including contact details when IRO is allocated within 5 days of coming into care.	Develop notification process to inform young person (age appropriately) of the IRO's details.	IRO Service	September 2014	A	Letter is in draft ready for sign off and use – this will be completed by beginning of July 2015.
2)	<p><u>Planning and preparation arrangements for LAC Reviews including:</u> IRO to speak with the SW 15 working days prior to review</p> <p>Consult with the child 10 working days prior & agree role of child/young person in the review (including arrangement for young person to chair some/all of the meeting).</p>	IROs to forward task date for consultation and planning and preparation with SW and young person.	IROs and SWs	Sept 2014	A	IROs are liaising and consulting in order to make best plans for LAC reviews but this may not always be strictly within the prescribed timescales – resolutions around sufficient capacity will help to improve this.

	REQUIREMENT	ACTION	WHO	WHEN	RAG	COMMENTARY
3)	Written consultation to child, parent, carers and other significant person 10 working days prior to review	Update consultation process and methods	IRO Service with children and young people	September 2014	A	As per Appendix 1 sections 5 & 7, part of this work has been achieved but the elements relating to parents/carers and other significant persons are outstanding and will form part of the next phase of this work.
4)	To distribute decisions and minutes within timescale		IRO Service		A	<p>Target is within 20 working days for full record of the LAC Review.</p> <p>Proportion of Reviews where target has been fully met but also delays ranging from a few weeks to up to 3 months for some.</p> <p>Position is as a result of cumulative effect over time, impacted by sufficiency within the IRO Service – the Service continues to employ a range of workload management and business support strategies including frequent and regular monitoring, review and management oversight to address.</p>

Appendix 4 – Tables of figures

Table 1

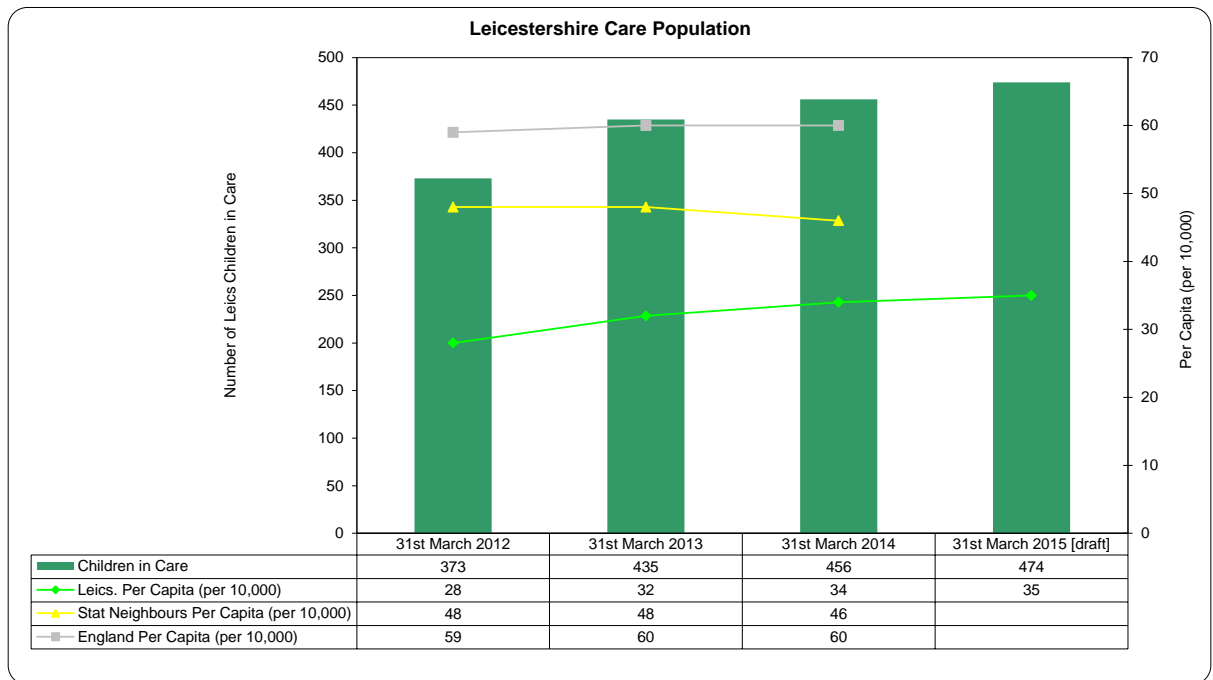
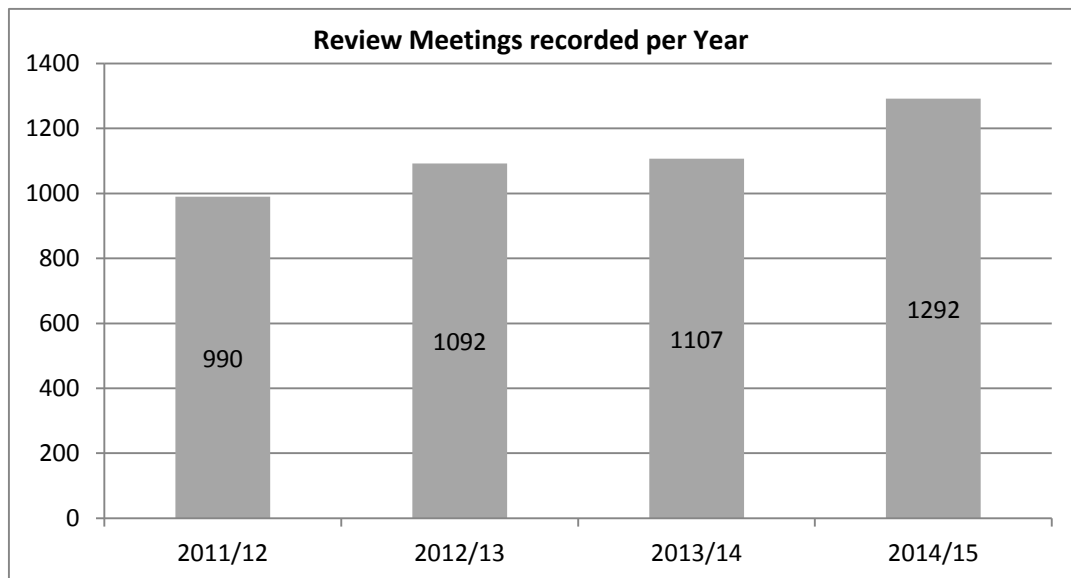


Table 2



Includes adoption reviews in 2014/15

Table 3

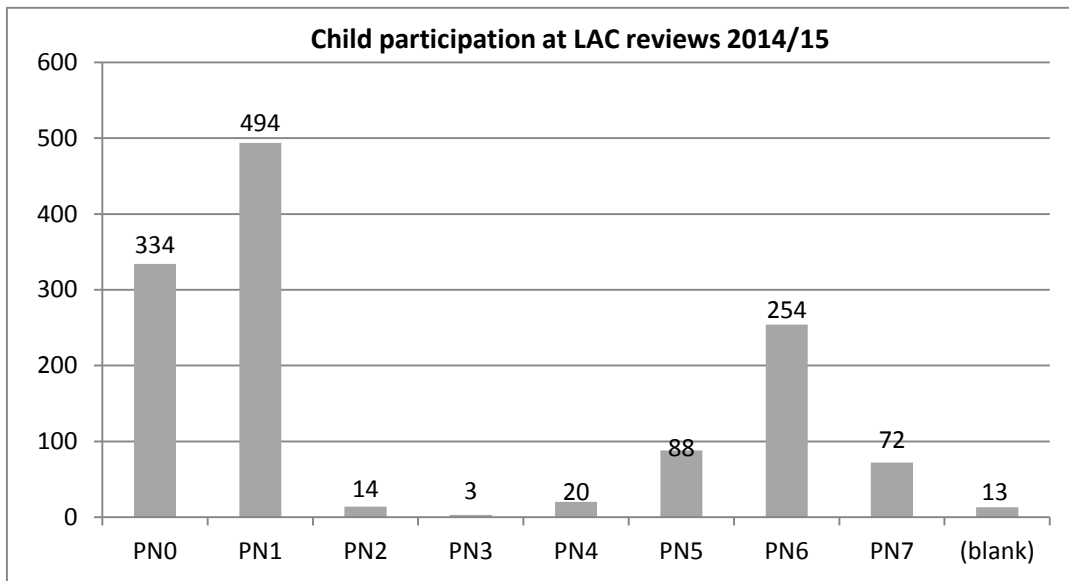


Table 4

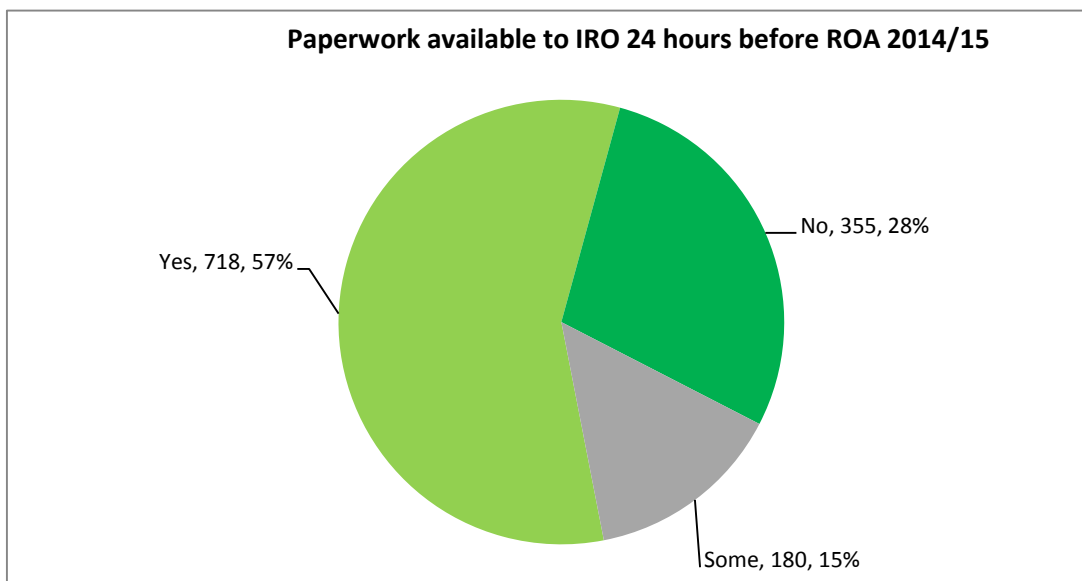


Table 4a

