

Making care plans work well for children: messages from UEA research into care planning and the role of the IRO

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Today's programme

- **Talk 1: Care planning and the roles of the IRO**
- 3.00-3.30: Break
- **Talk 2: The review process and key messages from the study**
- 4.30-5.00: Panel discussion

Care planning and review

- Good planning and review have long been seen as essential to avoid drift and delay, achieve permanence and ensure good care for looked after children;
- Since 2004, 'independent reviewing officers' have chaired the reviews, but there have been on-going questions about their effectiveness and independence;
- New regulations and statutory guidance came into force in 2011, to improve care planning and strengthen the role of the IRO;
- Our central research question: 'How are they working?'

Care planning and review: a changing context

- *Munro Review of Child Protection* (2010-11)
- *Family Justice Review* (2010-11), Children & Families Act 2014
- Government policy drive for adoption – meets *Re B-S [2013]*
- Powers to delegate children's social care functions to third party providers (see evaluation of social work practice pilots, Stanley *et al.*, Sept 2012)
- Financial constraints on local authorities
- Further changes to regs and stat guidance (e.g. delegated authority, youth justice, foster to adopt, staying put)

IROs: a challenging context

- Lancashire judgment (2012) Judge Peter Jackson
- Ofsted report (2013)
- National Children's Bureau report (2014)

Ofsted and NCB give examples of good practice, but there are shared messages about care planning and IROs:

- *More rigorous monitoring, more challenge – on individual cases, and for agency as a whole*
- *Clearer 'footprint' – e.g. clear and 'SMART' review records*
- *Need manageable workloads and management support, training*
- *Room for improvement within current arrangements*

Research questions

- How are the 2010 care planning regulations and guidance being implemented?
- What is the role of IROs in monitoring the plans of the local authority, promoting children's well-being, and managing their participation?
- What are the overlaps and differences in the roles and responsibilities of those involved in planning for children in care; how are decisions made and disagreements managed?
- What are the views of children and parents about care planning and review, particularly the IRO?

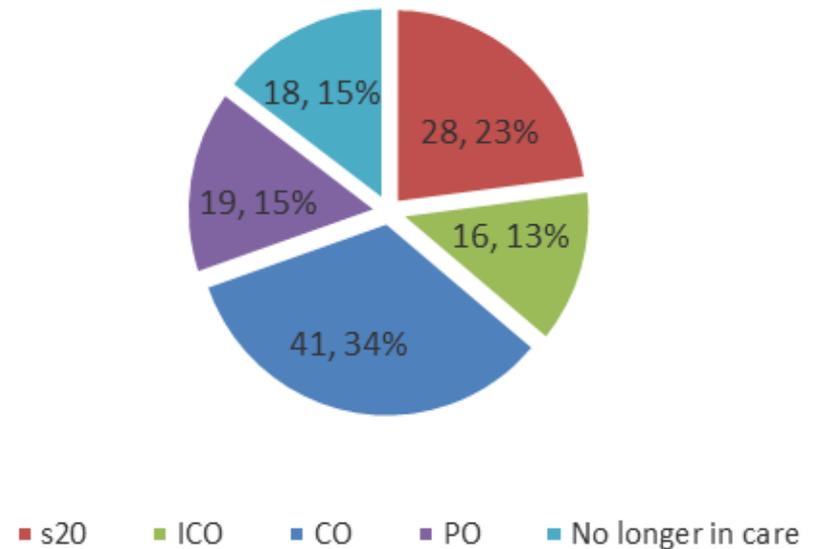
The research project: 2012-14

- Case file analysis in four LAs: 122 cases in all, different legal statuses
- In-depth interviews on half the cases (61):
- Interviewees were social workers (54); IROs (54); parents (15) and young people (15)
- A multi-professional focus group in each LA (4)
- Two focus groups with young people
- Nationally distributed questionnaires for IROs (65), team managers (46) and children's guardians (39)

Care planning and change: the children in the sample

- Three legal statuses –
s. 20: 37, 30%
ICO: 36, 30%
CO (+ PO): 33 + 16 = 49, 40%
- But by time of file analysis, things had often changed ...
- And by the time of the interviews, further changes ...
- *Care and care planning as a dynamic process*

Chart 1: Number of children in each legal status category at time of file analysis



Helping positive change happen

Does the care planning and review system, and IROs as part of it, make a useful contribution to bringing about *positive change for children* – change that secures the best possible outcomes for them?

And by extension, in order to achieve this goal, do they contribute to:

- *change for social workers*
- *change for parents*
- *change for other carers and professionals*
- *change for organisations*

Achieving positive change as a *process*, and in a *system*

Key issues in permanence planning

- Reunification; ‘connected persons’; LTFC; SGO; adoption
- Under-5s
- Middle childhood
- Adolescents – ‘graduates’ and ‘entrants’
- Siblings – placement and contact
- ‘Borderline’ care
- Legal status and security – esp. SGOs

Under-5s

Danny, now 2 years old. Became looked after when 2 months old, and was placed with his PGPs. Has remained with them ever since. Care proceedings taken. Concerns over long-term suitability of PGPs, but he is now the subject of an SGO and a child in need plan.

Karyn, now 2 years old, on PO and placed with prospective adopters, with her older siblings who were already adopted there. On CP plan from birth, came into care aged 1, under s. 20. Care procs started after a month, concluded within six months. Some delay placing her, new SW moves it on. Karyn doing very well.

Middle childhood

Jacob, 7, one of twins, black African/European. Came into care aged 6 on s. 20, now CO. Boys placed together, but both have very challenging behaviour. Two foster placements struggled to cope, but by end of study the boys are together in LTFC. Supervised contact with M and F separately, alternate months.

Matthew, now 12, came into care aged 9. Still on s. 20, in long-term residential care with education. Complex additional needs. Was placed out of area, SW and second IRO unhappy with quality of placement. Moved to unit in home LA. By end of study, he is settling well and having overnight contact with his mother.

Adolescents

Jenna, 16. Came into care aged 10. Lived with M till 7, then F and step-M. Initially s. 20, then care order. Long-term foster placement ended after 4 years, because of behavioural difficulties. By end of study new foster placement approved as long-term, Jenna hoping to go to sixth form.

Leah, 16. Adopted when she was young, accommodated at age 14, adoption disruption. Three foster placements in quick succession, currently with parents of a friend. Things seem to be calming down. Has contact with adoptive family and birth family.

Care planning and review in context

- SW supervision
- SW-TM-IRO discussions
- Dispute resolution processes
- Child protection plans/pre-LAC work
- LA panels – ‘care planning’, ‘permanence’, ‘placement’, ‘resource’
- Other agencies – education, health, IFAs, residential units
- Placement availability and suitability
- Delegated authority
- Legal planning meetings
- Adoption processes
- Court

The IRO's role in helping change to happen: what can't be seen in the records

- Not everything that IROs do is visible in the record;
- Not everything *can* be, including some of the most effective, subtle ways of helping to achieve positive change;
- We are drawing on the case file records, but also the interviews, focus groups and questionnaires.

... what I do on a daily basis is not captured in any recordings. I mean, just yesterday ... I started off with a review, first thing ... when I got back, there were three different children that I had concerns about, so I nipped upstairs to where the social workers are sitting, and had a word with the team manager about one of them. I had a word with another team manager about another one. Now, I know those conversations are going to make a difference, because these people are going to get back to me today, and if they don't, I'll be chasing them again. And my working life is full of that; none of that is captured in recording. IRO interview

IRO roles for change (1)

- Monitoring permanence and future planning – the long term plan
- Identifying problems and gaps in the ‘arrangements’ – and helping to unstick them
- Holding an objective overview – a ‘helicopter view’
- Knowing the child and ensuring his/her views are heard – knowing the child’s views and wishes, helping him/her to participate as appropriate
- Acting as a bridge between parents/extended family and the LA

IRO roles for change (2)

- Keeping things on track – hearing different views, collective decision-making and facilitating the ‘team around the child’
- Offering advice or practice wisdom – to social workers and team managers, often informally, outside the review
- Providing continuity – knowing the child and their history (but IROs sometimes change)
- Providing extra ‘fire power’
- Direct intervention
- The IRO service contributing to wider organisational change

The IRO's role in practice

To quality assure the care planning and review process and ensure child's wishes and feelings are considered, but 'not to manage the case, supervise the social worker or devise the care plan' (IRO Handbook, paras 1.21-1.22)

In practice, it is often quite different, and a poorly formulated plan is developed and improved by the IRO. Sometimes the plan is in such poor shape that I find myself constructing it with the social worker. IRO questionnaire

Variation and ambiguity

If I was to say to a social worker, 'it is not my plan, I didn't make this plan, you made this plan, but I am reviewing it', that's slightly sort of disingenuous ... hopefully by consensus you might reach a view that changes the plan ... another plan evolves through the reviewing process. IRO interview

I take a very active role in ensuring that plans are appropriate and am fully involved in considering alternatives as necessary and proposing these, or challenging inadequate planning as required ... I take part in discussions about the case within and outside the normal LAC meetings. IRO questionnaire

Helping change happen for children

It does make you more efficient, because when you know that the IRO is on your back, you kind of have to say, 'Oh, my God, I didn't realise I didn't do that', so, you have to kind of get on with it. SW interview

IROs seem to be far more visible outside reviews, far more questioning, wanting far more updated information ... which is fine for me, you know... In fact, I often have meetings with them ... just to talk things over really, because they obviously know the situation and the child it's always good to have discussions with the people not so involved, involved but not in the day-to-day stuff ... SW interview

Overall, a positive picture of change ...

I think generally we work really well together and I think it goes back to that team around the child. You know, they are sort of holding it together and they do have sort of an outside picture or sense of what is going on so really they have a different, an overview. SW interview

... rather than being an irritant, a post that has been imposed, I think the legitimacy of the service has been recognised by staff and I think they genuinely see IROs as worth their place in the system, and they are worth consultation and involvement. Not always, but that's how I would see it. IRO interview

Inevitably, different experiences and perceptions

On occasion I have had concerns that the IRO is too involved in formulating plans inappropriately and I have been clear that this is not their role as they are not the worker's team manager. TM questionnaire

I see very little evidence of independent thinking in care plans, it seems to me rubber stamping of LA plans in most instances. CG questionnaire

Different perceptions ...

How do IROs and CGs work together when a case is in proceedings? Responses from the questionnaires

When case is in proceedings:		Always or mostly	Rarely or never
CG contacts IRO	IRO	27%	27%
	CG	67%	10%
IRO contacts CG	IRO	44%	19%
	CG	8%	62%
IRO and CG discuss care plan at end	IRO	19%	45%
	CG	54%	23%

Independence, challenge and change

Different ways of looking at 'independence':

1. Do IROs make a positive difference, and if so, how?
2. Are IROs able to effectively challenge plans which they regard as inappropriate, inadequate, or poorly implemented?
3. Are IROs compromised by being employed by LAs, and should they be in an independent organisation?

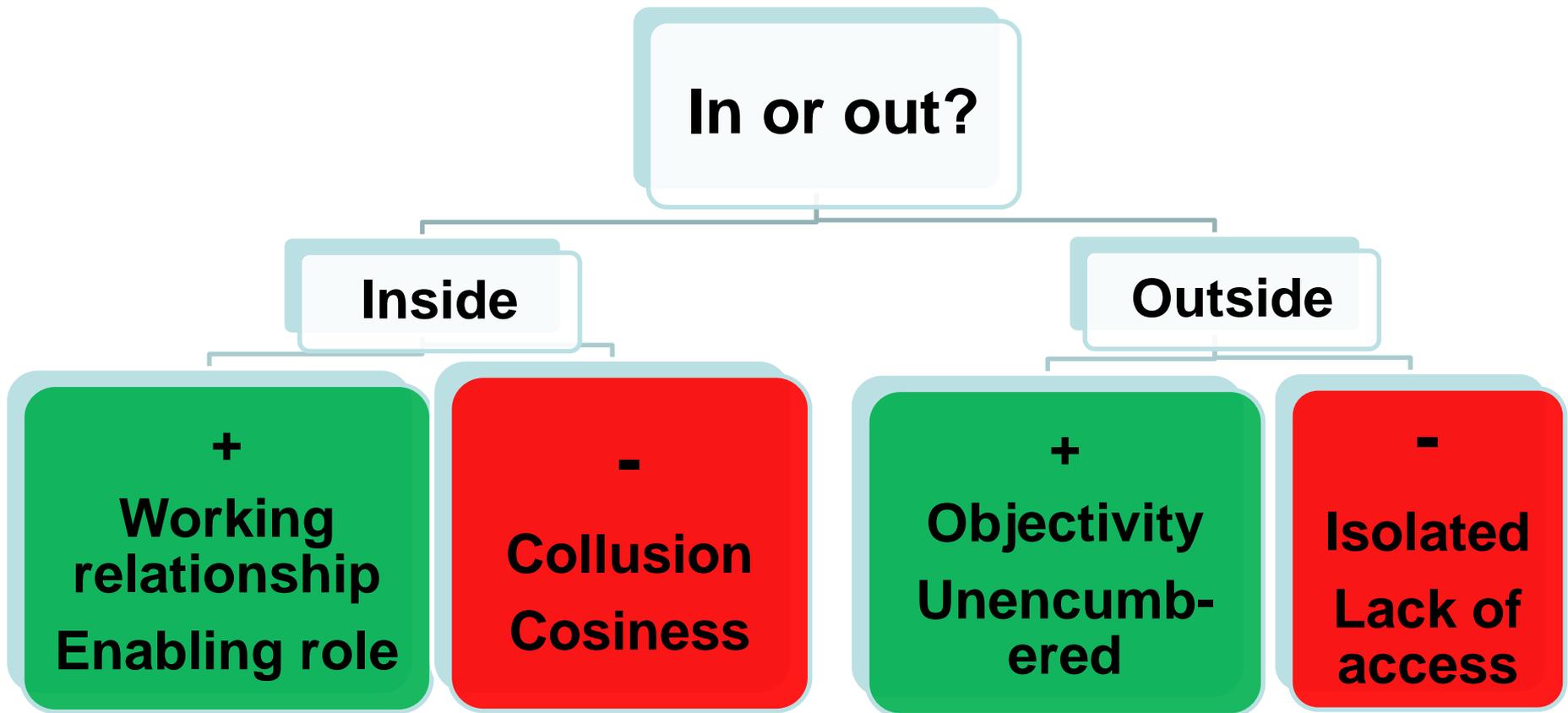
Formal challenge

IROs who had used:	Overall	LA-employed IROS	Self-employed IROs
Local dispute resolution	76%	81%	50%
Independent legal advice	36%	38%	30%
CAFCASS advice line	19%	21%	10%
Formal referral to CAFCASS	0%	0%	0%

Independence: the sunset clause

- CYPA 2008, sections 11 and 14: the Secretary of State has the power to establish a 'body corporate' to take over the running of the IRO service, but this power expires in November 2015.
- Is this necessary? Desirable? Likely to improve things for children?

Independence: pros and cons



Independence: other conclusions

- *Ofsted report (2013)*: ‘... the effectiveness of IROs would not be easily improved by removing them from the employment of local authorities. In most local authorities visited, there remained considerable scope for improvement under the current arrangements.’
- *National Children’s Bureau (2014)* ‘... it would be unfair to describe the role as failing if the problem really lies in the capacity available to fulfil it ... the factors enabling IROs to adopt a position of independent challenge are more complex than where the service “sits”.’
- *HoL Select Committee on Adoption Legislation (2013)* did recommend the creation of an independent service, but evidence to the committee was mixed; and the committee notes the importance of sufficient staff.

Independence: different perspectives

Should the IRO service be independent?

Responses on the questionnaire correlated closely to the degree of formal independence possessed by respondents themselves:

Respondents	In favour or strongly in favour of separating IROs from LAs
Children's guardians	67%
Self-employed IROs	30%
LA-employed IROs	25%
LAC team managers	18%

Challenge and the 'inside/outside' question

I find [IROs] really helpful because even though they are working for the local authority, they still come down on you like a ton of bricks if certain things haven't been done. And also, because they are part of the organisation, they are aware of the issues ... they are easily accessible to us, you know. SW interview

... the thing about being inside is, that you have got the keys to the doors and actually you can just walk in. When you are outside and people are kind of putting up obstacles and barriers and holding the doors closed, you can't get in. IRO interview

To sum up ...

- Care planning and review is a high profile issue, politically and professionally – very high expectations on the process and all involved.
- Care is different for different children, and things change.
- ‘Corporate parenting’ means there are many decision-making settings and levels, with different agencies and professionals.
- Roles, tasks and boundaries may overlap – this can be frustrating, but can also be productive, and it is possible to keep an independent view.
- IROs help to achieve positive change for children, sometimes through formal challenge, but more often in more subtle and collaborative ways.