

Annual Report

Independent Reviewing Service Children in Care

April 2017 to March 2018

Tom Stevenson

Assistant Director, Quality Assurance & Performance

Contents	Page
1. Introduction	2
2. The statutory role of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO)	3
3. The IRO Service in Southwark	5
4. Ofsted Inspection March 2017	7
5. Themes and escalations	8
6. Child in care Reviews	12
7. Participation and advocacy	14
8. The IRO Service – strengths and areas for development	15
9. Appendix 1 – 10 Golden Rules	17

1. Introduction

A strong Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) Service is a key component of good corporate parenting. The IRO service works jointly with the local authority's children's service, senior managers and multi-agency partners to support improved outcomes for Southwark's children in care. This is done through robust oversight and challenge of how services meet their needs, the quality of care and progress against care plans, both as individuals and as a vulnerable group within our local community. The Service recognises that whilst it can demonstrate areas of strength there is still much work to do in increasing the consistency, quality and impact of the IRO service in improving outcomes for the children and young people in Southwark's care.

The IRO Service operates within the framework of the IRO Handbook. The IRO has a key role in relation to the improvement and quality assurance of the Care Planning for Looked after Children and for challenging any drift and delay to meeting the identified and assessed needs of looked after children and young people. IRO's are responsible for identifying themes and have a responsibility to promote best practice and model high professional standards across the Children's & Families Division impacting positively on practice and outcomes for children and young people in care.

This report has been produced by the IRO Service in line with statutory guidance and provides an overview of the IRO Service for the period **1 April 2017- 31 March 2018**. That guidance makes clear an Annual Report should be produced for the scrutiny of the members of the Corporate Parenting Committee. This report should identify good practice but should also highlight issues for further development, including where urgent action is needed. It should make reference to:

- procedures for resolving concerns, including the local dispute resolution process and it should include an analysis of the issues raised in dispute and the outcomes;
- the development of the IRO service including information on caseloads, continuity of employment and the make up of the team and how it reflects the identity of the children it is serving;
- extent of participation of children and their parents;
- the number of reviews that are held on time, the number that are held out of time and the reasons for the ones that are out of time;
- outcomes of quality assurance audits in relation to the organisation, conduct and recording of reviews; and
- whether any resource issues are putting at risk the delivery of a quality service to all looked after children.

2. The statutory role of an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO)

Introduced by the *Adoption and Children Act 2002*, the statutory role of the IRO monitors how the local authority fulfils its duty to children in care through regular statutory reviews of their care plans. The Independent Reviewing Service is set within the framework of the updated IRO Handbook, linked to the revised Care Planning Regulations and Guidance introduced in 2015. The *Children and Young Persons Act 2008* extended IRO responsibilities from the management of the Review process to a wider overview of the case including regular monitoring and follow-up between Reviews. The IRO has a key role in relation to the improvement of care planning for children Looked After and for challenging drift and delay. The IRO has a unique power to refer a case to the Children's and Families Court Advisory Support Service (CAFCASS) if our local escalation and resolution processes cannot resolve any dispute over how a child in care's needs are being met. All children in care including those on adoption plans or receiving short breaks are included within these regulations.

The IRO's primary role is to quality assure the care planning and review process for each child in care and to ensure that their current wishes and feelings are given due consideration. The role should be valued by senior managers and operate within a supportive service culture and environment to be successful. An effective IRO service supports the local authority to achieve improved outcomes for children.

The child's review considers the quality of the care plan which is based on the social work assessment of the child's individual needs. The care plan should set out how the full range of the child's identified needs will be met. The IRO must be satisfied that the plan identifies who is responsible for achieving the plan's objectives, that the resources identified can be utilised and that clear timescales for each stage of progression are set.

Each child in care has a named IRO who provides independent oversight including:

- Determining and representing the child's wishes and feelings
- Ensuring their rights and interests are protected
- Assessing whether the care plan meets the child's assessed needs and progression is timely
- Negotiating with the social work team on any identified issues arising from the care plan or implementation of the care plan. They can escalate unresolved concerns through the local authority's management structure, and/or if necessary to CAFCASS.

The main forum through which the IRO carries out their monitoring role is the statutory looked after review. These take place regularly at the following times:

- first review within the first 28 days of the child going into care
- second review within 90 days
- subsequent reviews at 180 day intervals
- when a child or IRO asks for one
- when significant events occur or when the care plan is changed.

The review takes place at the child's placement wherever possible. Parents, residential workers, foster carers and their support workers, social worker and the IRO will attend the review meeting. Almost all reviews and conferences in Southwark are held to time and with good rates of child and family participation.

Short Breaks

Short breaks are part of a continuum of services which support children in need and their families. They include the provision of day, evening, overnight and weekend activities for the child or young person, and can take place in the child's own home, the home of an approved carer, or in a residential or community setting. In Southwark disabled children and their families are the primary users of short breaks.

The statutory guidance *Short Breaks: Statutory Guidance on how to safeguard and promote the welfare of disabled children using short breaks 2010* focuses in particular on the decision as to whether overnight short breaks should be provided under Section 17 or Section 20 of the Children Act 1989 and the consequences in relation to 'looked after' status if section 20 provision is made. The guidance states that reviews for children who are receiving short breaks under S20 arrangements but are not looked after, should take place at least every six months. Reviews for clearly "looked after" children must take place in accordance with the *Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010* and be undertaken by an IRO. The role of the IRO for children looked after in a series of short breaks is more limited than for children looked after longer term. It is important that IROs are sensitive to the close and active involvement of parents. The IRO has a responsibility to alert the local authority if the placement is not meeting the child's needs

3. The IRO Service in Southwark

The Southwark IRO Service sits within the Quality Assurance Unit (QAU) and the Head of Quality Assurance reports to the Assistant Director, Quality and Performance. This places the IRO Service outside of the operational social work management structure to facilitate their independent function.

In addition to the core task of monitoring and reviewing children's care plans, the IRO Service has also been involved with:

- Mosaic performance continued to be a major challenge throughout the year with issues around workflow, practice and performance reporting. The IRO Service has worked hard to improve data accuracy on Mosaic which accounts for improved year end performance figures.
- development of local policies and procedures
- provided induction training for new social workers around planning for children and young people in care
- attended health, education, participation and adoption/permanency groups
- One IRO leads on harmful sexually harmful behaviour (HSB)
- individual cases, offering consultation and advice to operational staff
- audit work in conjunction with other departments
- training and liaison with teams
- assisting with complaints and advocacy
- joint work with the commissioning team to monitor the quality of placements
- highlighting good practice by social workers
- Oversight and challenge of practice areas requiring improvement.

IRO's are managed by the Quality Assurance Unit (QAU) service managers. IROs and Child Protection (CP) Chairs share a joint job description meaning that some looked after reviews are chaired by CP chairs. This enables a Chair who knows a family to continue their involvement as the IRO if a child goes into care. Administrative support is provided by a fulltime executive officer managed by the QAU Administration Manager.

Staffing in 2017-18 consisted of:

- Three directly employed permanent staff who act predominately as IROs plus 5 CP conference chairs who carry out occasional Looked After Children (LAC) reviews
- 15 freelance self-employed sessional workers funded by three full time equivalent posts. These have varying caseloads of around 14 - 60 children.

A key strength of the service is the stable, highly experienced IRO and Child Protection Chair cohort. Approximately 20% of the IRO group including those who are long-term sessional IRO's are from a BME background. There is a current gender imbalance with 90% of IRO's being women. Staff maintain good working relationships with social workers, managers and have developed good relationships with children and Speaker Box – Southwark's Children in Care Council over the long term. Some IRO's have been with the department since 2009 and have been with their allocated children throughout their care history.

4. OFSTED Inspection March 2017

The Ofsted Single Inspection Framework (SIF) inspection in March 2017 found that Children's Services in Southwark were "Good" overall. However the inspection found that the quality of work for children looked after was "too variable" and practice for Looked After children "required improvement".

The Inspection found many positives in the majority of children and young people achieving good outcomes and the support offered by the Virtual School. The early consideration of permanence for younger children leading to timely permanent placements. The strength of the social work support to potential adopters and the robust assessment, training and post-adoption support offered to adoptive families enabled these families to thrive. There was a noted improvement in the timeliness of cases going into Care Proceedings and those which were being progressed via the Public Law Outline (PLO)

Inspectors however highlighted some poor oversight by managers and Independent Reviewing Officers. This lack of oversight led to delays in delivering children's care plans and, in a small number of cases safeguarding assurance about individual children could not be provided. Children and young people had experienced numerous moves and placement breakdowns, often because of a lack of resilient placements for adolescents who displayed challenging behaviours. For children in long-term fostering placements their need to have a sense of permanency through formal permanency planning and matching was not progressed in a timely way. Some children had a number of social workers over a short period of time, which impacted on their ability to form a trusted relationship, whilst others saw delay in providing the life-story work that would help them make sense of their situation.

Following the inspection the Service has worked to an ongoing improvement plan to address the identified deficits within the IRO group and between the IRO's and the Care service. There has been a programme of audits looking at the quality of reviews and decision making and these have been fed back into training and development work with the IRO's. In addition the IRO's have met with operational managers from the care service to discuss how to make the representation and escalation processes work more efficiently. IRO escalation forms will shortly be put onto the Mosaic system so that they can be reported on and tracked more effectively.

5. Themes and escalations

Safeguarding Looked After Children

Safeguarding young people in care continues to present challenges and In 2017-18 the most frequent areas of vulnerability were:

- Criminal exploitation of young people potentially in 'County Lines' activities
- Children and young people in care being victims of CSE and Criminal Exploitation with their care status being an additional vulnerability.
- Children and young people in care going missing from placement and being at increased risk from the above.

Responding to children and young people missing or absent from care continues to be a key area for joint work with frontline staff and the police. There is an added focus on the quality and timeliness of return home interviews to gain knowledge around risk and vulnerability and the push/pull factors when young people are away from placements. During 2017-18 the number of recorded missing episodes reduced – 746 as opposed to 998 the previous year. IROs are always informed where young people in care go missing and are invited to contribute to missing from care strategy meetings and planning meetings.

In order to provide dedicated oversight a new permanent CSE and Missing Co-ordinator was appointed in April 2018. Through direct liaison with the Care Service she has increased operational knowledge about the cohort of young people most at risk of CSE or Criminal Exploitation. She also runs regular workshops for staff to ensure that they are aware of danger signs and resources available.

'I went missing because I was stressed about where I was'

'I ran away because my brother came out of prison; my social worker should have realised what I would do'

'I don't think missing is the right word, I knew exactly where I was and who I was with'

In some cases where concerns are heightened, the Local Authority will seek a period of secure accommodation, to safeguard the young person and to enable planning to take place. During 2017-18, 4 children were placed in Welfare Secure placements for between 2 -6 months due to serious concern about their safety and welfare. Two cases were linked to extended missing episodes with CSE vulnerability and two others linked to extended missing periods with criminal exploitation vulnerabilities.

Placements and permanence

Children and young people in care being placed far from home

Children and young people being placed at a distance from Southwark can influence their wellbeing and access to services, and IRO's are always conscious that this should be a significant factor in care planning. There has been a concerted effort by the Care Service to reduce the number of long distance placements. At the end of March 2018 there were 25% (121) children in placements over 20 miles from Southwark and it is expected that this will continue to reduce as the year progresses.

Helping all children and young people achieve permanency.

As part of the Review process IRO's from the second review will talk about the Permanency Planning for children and young people. The Inspection found that this was an area that needed to improve in terms of the IRO challenge when children were not in placements that had been identified and ratified as their permanent home. An area of success for the Fostering and Care Services for 2017/2018 was the strong focus, following on from those Inspection findings, on ensuring children for whom Permanence is within a long term Fostering setting were matched with long term carers and permanency secured. This increase in children being matched went from 3 in 2016/17 to 15 children in 2017/18. This is a 400% increase and expected to continue to increase further during 2018/19. IRO's in partnership with the relevant services have maintained the drive on this key indicator for better LAC outcomes.

Escalations

IROs play a key role in scrutinising and improving care planning and challenging drift and delay. The consistency of quality and impact of this challenge remains an area for development, with some examples of good practice to build on.

During 2017-18 there were a total of 219 escalations on 193 children over the year and the reasons for the escalations are shown in the chart below. Escalations were raised for a variety of reasons however the largest proportion of escalations continues to be for incomplete or inadequate care plan recording in Mosaic.

Overall, most escalations are responded to promptly by operational managers - in five cases the matter was escalated to an Assistant Director or above to resolve.

IRO's initiate escalation within the following categories if local resolution cannot be achieved.

- **Incomplete or inadequate Care Plans:** Care plan not completed or signed off in Mosaic and so work flow stalled; Care Plan or Pathway Plan of poor quality
- **Drift or delay in care planning:** Drift/delay in legal planning or permanency decisions including a lack of consultation when changing the Care Plan.
- **Safeguarding concerns including missing episodes, criminal or sexual exploitation:** Non participation of child and parents in decision making e.g. before any change of placement; discriminatory practice; not informing child of rights and advocacy; not seeking parent's consent/restricting their contact if child on Section 20 etc.
- **Concerns Around Social Work Provision:** Delay in allocating cases; lack of stability and/or consistency of social work input; social work absence; child raises concerns; discriminatory practice; frequent transition between social workers/teams/services.
- **Placement Concerns:** Including poor placement planning; quality or appropriateness of placement.
- **Education:** Lack of educational progress; inadequate or inappropriate education provision.
- **Health:** Health issues not being addressed; health, emotional or behaviour support needed.
- **18+ planning:** Including staying put decision making.
- **Action and effectiveness of management:** Including timeliness and evidence of decision-making.
- **Non completion of review decisions;**
- **Other.**

Identifying good practice, problem resolution and escalation

Independent Reviewing Officers raise concerns with social care teams via an escalation process. The Service is reviewing the process and there has been an increased focus on designing a system that centrally records escalations and outcomes on the child's case record. Progress has been slow due to IT and system challenges, but a formal escalation process has been devised on Mosaic and has passed the test phase. The Service will now work with Mosaic to report and support ongoing monitoring and reporting.

Despite the need to evidence IRO oversight and challenge identified in the Ofsted Inspection, the majority of concerns are still raised informally with the team manager initially; the need to capture that data will be a central goal of the escalation reporting tool and will enable the Service to extract themes and measure the volume of informal escalation activity. Going forward the service will look at regular tracking of open formal escalations so that there is a process that ensures escalations reach a staged resolution. There is a need to make the escalation process more formal and robust to demonstrate recognition of the deficit that led to escalation and the impact of the escalation process in bringing resolution.

Most escalations continue to be generated in relation to Care Plan and Pathway Plan completion, often because of workflow issues within the Mosaic system. This is being addressed systemically through staff training and floor walking and the service is designing user friendly forms to make IRO processes more intuitive and user friendly.

Primary reason for escalations 2017-18

1. Incomplete or inadequate care plan documents including Mosaic workflow issues	67.6%
2. Drift/delay in care planning	10.5%
3. Safeguarding concerns including missing episodes, crime related or CSE risk	2%
4. Concerns around social work provision	5%
5. Placement concerns	7.3%
6. Education	2.7%
7. Health	2%
8. 18+ planning	3%
9. Action and effectiveness of managers	3%
10. Non completion of review decisions	3%
11. Other	7.3%

Examples of IRO Escalation:

A 16 year old young man on a Full Care Order did not have British Citizenship. The timeframe to address this as a child was becoming short and the IRO escalated this to the Head of Service, who after discussion agreed that the Council would fund the citizenship application. This went ahead and the young person was able to gain a passport from his country of origin and able to work with a solicitor to apply for British citizenship

A young care leaver had taken advantage of a “staying put” arrangement with his foster carers but the payments to the care leaver had not been sorted out potentially jeopardising the arrangements made. The IRO escalated the issue to the Service Manager who was able to arrange to action the payments on the same

6. Participation and advocacy

SpeakerBox, Southwark's Children in Care Council, updated the 'Golden Rules' for social workers in May 2016. Since then these rules are used in social work training and have been circulated to the different service areas for display and discussion and are pinned up in offices (see appendix 1 – 'Golden rules' from SpeakerBox).

The themes most "live" with SpeakerBox members throughout 2017/18 have been:

- The importance of sibling contact
- relationships with social workers / personal advisors
- finances (i.e. late payments or not accessing savings)
- mental health and well-being of children in care and care leavers
- making the pathway planning process more young people friendly.

The Children's Rights Service ran a campaign '**Sibling contact matters to me**' in 2016-17. As part of that activity an animation workshop, a spoken word workshop and the making of a video about sibling contact with the Rainbow collective was initiated. The video was launched in the half-term during October 2017.



A Report arising from research into the issues around sibling contact was completed in July 2017 and sent to both the IRO Service and the management group in Children's & Families. A research report on Sibling contact was completed in July 2017 and sent to the IRO group and the Children's Social Care management team. The IRO's additionally received a video presentation from Speakerbox on this topic. Young people provided contributions some of which are recorded below.

"I can say that I've always had good contact with my siblings thanks to my foster carer and my social worker"(Female, aged 21),

"You need to see your siblings because it's depressing if you don't" (Male, 11 years).

"..... we should encourage siblings to stay at the same foster placement, rather than going the long route and getting the social worker to establish contact" (Male, 17 years)

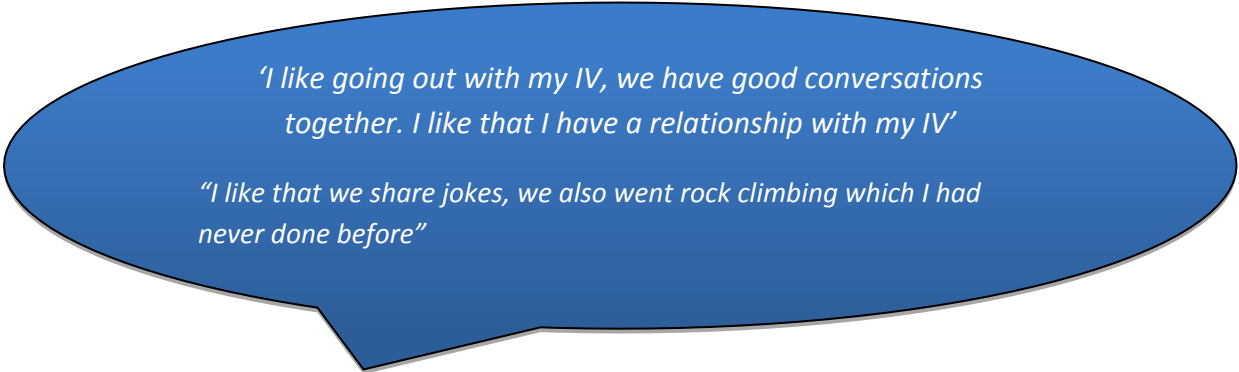
Although everyone's experiences were often quite different, all young people consulted thought that there was a need to raise more awareness – particularly with social workers and foster carers. They agreed that SpeakerBox should run a campaign about this important issue which went live in 2017.

Following the Sibling Campaign, Speaker Box have also worked with young people and the Bubble Theatre Company on building relationships with social workers. A staff training video produced will be formally launched with a staff presentation later in the year.

Advocacy Provision

Barnardo's currently provides the Advocacy offer to children and young people in Care and Care leavers in Southwark. Barnardo advocates meet regularly with the IRO group in order to encourage and facilitate referrals where appropriate. A total of 102 children and young people received advocacy support from the Barnardo's service in 2017-18.

Action for Children co-ordinates the Independent Visitor service for Southwark Looked after children. In 2017-18 31 children received input from Independent Visitors.



'I like going out with my IV, we have good conversations together. I like that I have a relationship with my IV'

"I like that we share jokes, we also went rock climbing which I had never done before"

The provision of advocacy and independent visitors is being re-commissioned in 2018 and following a tendering process will transfer to the new/renewed provider in January 2019.

7. Children in care reviews

During 2017-18 the IRO team chaired and completed reports for 1268 reviews of looked after children as well as making representations, participating in staff induction and training, undertaking audits and undertaking a range of other tasks.

	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18
Number of LAC Reviews	1548	1377	1235	1319	1268
NI66 LAC Reviews held in timescale	96.5%	92%	87.8% (416)	90%	91%
C63 Young People's Participation at LAC Reviews	94%	94%	96.4% (1,190)	97%	97%
LAC numbers at 31 March 2018	550	503	474	498	491

The number of children and young people in care has remained relatively stable over the last 3 years. Performance in relation to timely reviews during 2017-18 showed a slight improvement on the previous year.

Participation rates of children and young people in their reviews are very good, with 97% of children and young people participating in the review process either through individual attendance, speaking with the IRO beforehand or contributing via Consultation forms. An area for input and data capture going forward will be the percentage of young people who feel able to Chair or Co-Chair their own Review.

IROs spend time individually with children and young people prior to a review to determine their wishes and feelings; identify any concerns and determine how they would like to participate in the meeting. The IRO will ensure an advocate is provided to support the child or young person if necessary or requested. Children and young people who have English as a second language have an interpreter available. Children with disabilities or with communication difficulties are supported to express their views with help of their carers or a specialist worker or advocate.

Where a child does not attend their review, the IRO arranges to meet children and young people at a different time, or speak to them on the phone to try and gain their views...

Southwark's performance remains strong in both involving young people in their reviews and ensuring that care plans reflect their views. Only 3% of children in care over the age of four did not participate or give their views in a looked after review meeting in 2017-18. Improving the consistency and quality of participation in reviews remains an ongoing commitment of the IRO Service.

8. The IRO Service: strengths and areas for development

Strengths:

The IRO Service is staffed by experienced, long-serving staff who have often been involved in children's lives in the long term, enabling consistent trusting relationships to be built. There are also positive links with the operational social work teams enabling good facilitation in meeting children's needs.

The IRO group meet regularly with the Children's Rights worker and Speaker Box members to enable that communication loop from young people in placements to be maintained.

Review reports are generally of good quality and underpinned by SMART plans.

There is good multi-agency working with both the virtual school and health, an example of which was the joint work undertaken with the Lead Doctor (LAC) to support service development.

There are high rates of child participation and evidence of the IRO's listening to the child's voice in Reviews.

Areas for development in 2018-19

The OFSTED inspection in 2017 highlighted that there needed to be stronger evidenced challenge to the operational service particularly in relation to drift and delay in gaining permanency for young people.

To further develop child friendly reviews and support chaired or co-chaired reviews by young people. To provide child friendly minutes, written to the child after every review to enable children and young people to understand outcomes desired and challenge any lack of progress.

- To align IRO processes with a Signs of Safety approach to LAC reviews.
- Continue to build processes that are Mosaic based enabling tracking and reporting across IRO activity.
- Increase oversight and challenge to the areas of PEP performance and Health Assessment timeliness through LAC and midway reviewing.
- Continue to build strong partnerships with the operational management to support whole service improvement
- Work in partnership with the CSE & Missing Co-ordinator to identify and support young people with additional vulnerability to CSE and criminal exploitation

Programme for April 2018 – March 2019

- Ensure that all Looked After Children and Young People are aware at the first Review of why they are in care, that they or their carer know how to seek advocacy or complain about the service and support they receive.
- Increase the number of reviews that children and young people Chair/Co-Chair
- Escalations to be recorded and progressed via Mosaic. Performance tracking and management information to be produced as a result.
- Embed Signs of Safety within the LAC Review processes
- Promote and understand how advocacy can help young people participate in their conference and challenge drift and delay in care planning.
- IRO's to offer "high support/high challenge" to social workers and operational Team Managers around meeting obligations to children and young people and seeing Reviews as "live" organic processes that have meaning and purpose.
- IRO's will support the initiatives to enable children in care to build "life long links with extended family members or friendship networks, and explore alternative care options as part of review and planning.

Appendix 1 – Golden rules from SpeakerBox

Young people from SpeakerBox, Southwark’s children in care council, developed a set of ‘Golden rules’ in May 2016. The Golden rules are for social workers in Southwark to work by and ensure their practice and approach reflects these rules:

Listen Up	Our views are important and need to be taken seriously.
Be Honest	Tell us why we are in care. Tell us the TRUTH. Please tell us about our rights to see our records too. This can help us understand our past.
Be Reliable	Turn up on time and always return our calls. If you do not see us every 6 weeks, keep us updated with phone calls or messages. If you promise something, make sure you keep it. Let us know and remind us when you are coming, and give us more than 24 hours notice unless it is a Child Protection visit. We have lives too.
Our Way of Saying It	Go through the consultation document with us instead of sending it through the post. Make sure you know how we feel and be creative to help us find the best way to express it. It can be hard to say how you feel on a long form and it can feel overwhelming.
Quality Time	The quality of the visit is more important than how long the visit is. Everyone can not sit and talk for an hour. Sometimes we want to do an activity while we talk. The review does not count as a visit.
Good Conversation	Ask new and varied questions on each visit. Do not ask the same questions every time. Get to know us. There is more to us than just being in care.
Good Meetings	We do not want too many meetings, and we do not want any people there that do not have to be there. We do not want to miss school or college because of meetings! Make sure you send us the decisions from the meeting within two weeks or at least within a month.
Help Us Keep in Contact	We want help to keep in touch with our family. We also want help with keeping in touch with extended family members. Support us to make contact as good as possible. If there is a reason why we cannot have contact explain it, do not just say “no”.
Money Matters	Tell us about what we are entitled to, since we speak to each other. We should have saving accounts and have this explained to us.
Documents for Life	Always check to see if we have a passport and a birth certificate. Always clarify a child or young person’s status. If this cannot be done, make sure you write the reason why.
Believe in Us	We need someone to believe in us and show us that we can achieve more than we have ever imagined.