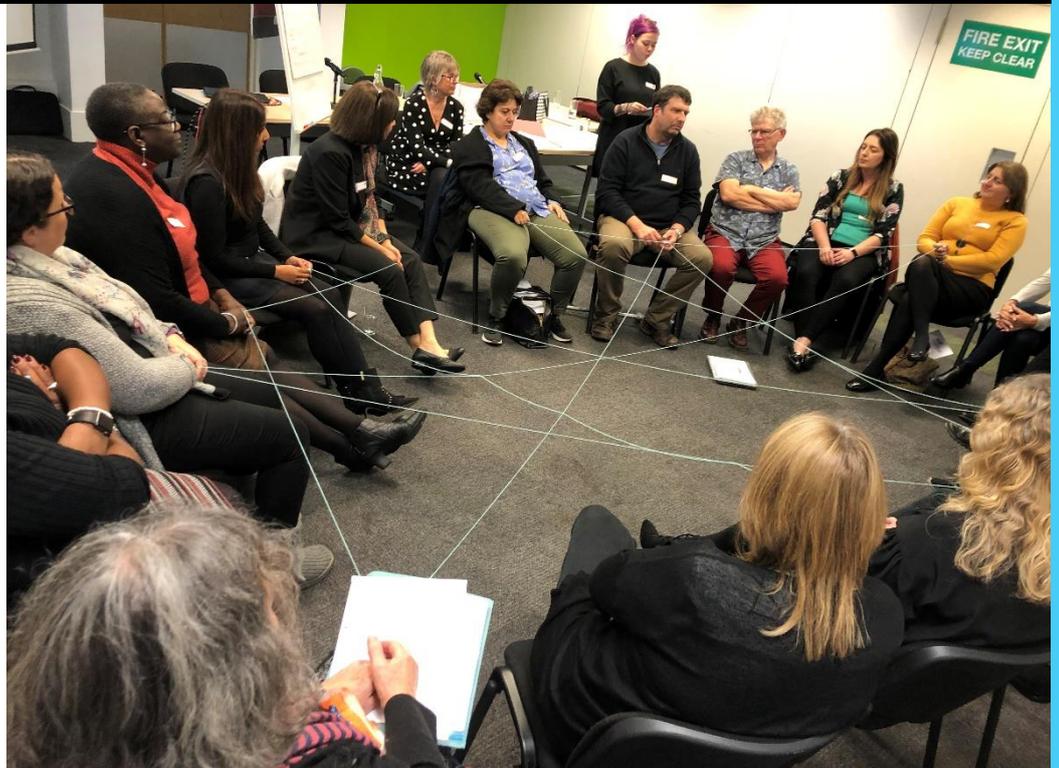




2019

# NAIRO 9th Annual Conference Report



Judy Walsh  
NAIRO



## Conference Programme

### Children & Young People Matter - What Works Best?

#### The critical contribution of the IRO

9.45am – 10.00am	Introduction – Housekeeping Patron Welcome - Francis Listowel
10.00am – 10.20am	Lorna Stabler, Research Associate, CASCADE, Cardiff University <b><i>How can children and young people be meaningfully included in social work meetings?</i></b>
10.20am – 10.30am	Kayleigh Jones <b><i>Looking at young people's experiences and views on LAC reviews and linking this into life story work.</i></b>
10.30am – 11.15am	Dr Jan Macvarish, Associate Research Fellow, Birkbeck School of Law, University of London <b><i>Siblings, contact and the law - an overlooked relationship?</i></b>
11.15am – 11.35am	<b>BREAK</b>
11.35am – 11.55am	Dr Clive Diaz <b><i>Barriers children face complaining about social work practice</i></b>
11.55am – 12.40pm	Panos Vostanis, Professor of Child Mental Health, University of Leicester and Visiting Professor, University College London <b><i>Child mental health implications for case planning and reviews</i></b>
12.40am – 12.45pm	Professor June Thoburn CBE FRSA, Closing Remarks
12.45pm – 1.25pm	<b>LUNCH</b>
1.30pm – 2.25pm	Workshops (1) Kayleigh Jones <b><i>Taking the participants on the journey of a child in care</i></b> (2) Placement support <b><i>Special Guardianship a complicated story</i></b> (3) Dr Helen Cosis Brown <b><i>Improving the quality and stability of children's lives - the IRO and FIRO roles in foster carer reviews</i></b>
2.30pm – 2.50pm	Nigel Kelleher, Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Health, Social Care and Medicine, Edge Hill University <b><i>What do we know from court judgements and Ofsted about how the IRO service could be improved?</i></b>
2.50pm – 3.00pm	Jon Fayle, Co-chair, NAIRO <b><i>The NAIRO Improvement Plan</i></b>
3.00pm – 3.15pm	<b>BREAK</b>
3.15pm – 3.40pm	Julie Selwyn, Professor of Education and Adoption, CBE <b><i>Young people's subjective well-being- what did Bright Spots tell us?</i></b>
3.40pm – 4.10pm	Affinity Fostering Services <b><i>Child in care reviews considering young people's wishes</i></b>
4.10-4.15	Professor June Thoburn CBE FRSA, Closing Remarks



## Summary Report

### NAIRO 9<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference – 17.10.2019

#### Children and Young people Matter - the IRO: What Works?

The conference was held at Resource for London. It was attended by **57** delegates who were IRO managers and practitioners as well as academics and representatives from voluntary organisations.

#### Aim of the conference

To bring together interested parties in relation to the experiences of children and young people in care to consider key messages from recent research and to hear the direct voices of young people.

The conference was chaired by Professor June Thoburn.

*Professor June Thoburn has been a patron of NAIRO for 8 years. She was the founding Director of the University of East Anglia Centre for Research on the Child and Family and of Making Research Count collaboration. She was awarded the CBE for “services to Social Work “in 2002.*

The Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families, Michelle Donelan MP provided a statement on behalf of the DFE.

*“Independent Reviewing Officers can play an invaluable part in ensuring that children in care are in the right placement to meet their needs and to help them recover from past trauma. They can also make a considerable contribution to their long- term well – being and outcomes. It is therefore vital that we have the best possible IRO services promoting the needs and voices of children and young people.”*

#### **Speaker 1 - Lorna Stabler: How can children and young people be meaningfully included in Social work?**

*Lorna is a researcher at CASCADE, Cardiff University specialising in children’s Social Care.*

#### Key themes

Young people would like:

- An advocate to be involved to speak on their behalf at reviews, - this could be a foster carer, social worker, a relative or another trusted adult.



- To record their ideas and thoughts prior to any kind of meeting and to be given some control around the seating arrangements and planning of the meeting itself.
- To see that the actions that adults said they were going to do, have been completed.
- Review decisions that reflect the reasons why decisions have been made in the account given by the author

**Speaker 2 - Kayleigh Jones looking at young people's experiences and views on Looked after (LAC) reviews and linking this to life story work**

- *Kayleigh Jones is a care experienced young adult working as an assistant participation worker for children and young people who are in care or care experienced.*
- Kayleigh Jones completed a role-play exercise to talk about how young people are represented within meetings. This was a powerful presentation demonstrating how it feels to be talked about but not involved in the discussions.
- Young people need to understand better what the role of an IRO is and to have more communication with them before reviews .This should include a refresher as to what was agreed last time before the next meeting starts.
- When a young person is stressed, as is often the case in meetings, they may not remember everything. The use of Flip Charts, visuals and Skype is seen as positive. Needing to know the truth was particularly significant for all the other people questioned.
- Reading the social work reports is often difficult for young people and could be improved, (too much jargon/ judgments comments).
- Overall, the view is that a letter explaining the outcome of a meeting, the decisions made, and the reasons would be the preference for young people. These narrative letters could also then be used as part of a young person's life story work in later years.

*Participant feedback "Very friendly and welcoming. Some great content. Young person focused"*

**Speaker 3 - Dr Jan Macvarish: Siblings contact and the law - an overlooked relationship?**



*Dr Jan Macvarish is a Sociologist whose work focuses on the study of interpersonal relationships and family life. She is the author of the book Neuro- parenting invasion of family life*

The speaker outlined the focus of the research study which was to review where siblings appear in legislation and case law and to undertake focus groups with Guardians, IROs, Judges, Barristers and Solicitors in 2 different areas: London and the North West. Young people from the Family Justice Young People's board also participated.

The research considered why sibling relationships matter and the data associated with the placements of sibling groups in the UK. The research study put forward some key questions such as

- Who is a sibling?
- How are sibling relationships assessed?
- How are placement plan and contact decisions made about siblings?
- The use of legal orders for contact
- The Role of the IRO

#### **Speaker 4 - Clive Diaz Barriers: Children in Care face complaining**

*Dr Clive Diaz is an experienced lecturer, Social Worker and researcher.*

Dr Clive Diaz presented his recent research that was undertaken in one authority by means of structured interviews with 10 children/ young people, 11 Social workers, 8 IROs and 7 Senior Managers. The background context to this topic is that there is very little recent research about complaints. There has been 1 study in the last 10 years. The question was posed as to whether there may also be a cultural dimension as some people don't like complaining and disadvantaged groups may be concerned that making a complaint may make things worse.

#### **Speaker 5 - Professor Panos Vostanis Child Mental Health issues in relation to care planning and reviews**



*Professor Vostanis has published extensively on the impact of trauma on child mental health and is currently involved in projects with NGOS as part of the world awareness for Children in Trauma programme.*

In terms of mental health, it is the pattern that is relevant, in that there is an increase according to the level of adversity that a child/ young person experiences. In the general population 12% experience mental health problems. Of those children / young people living with disadvantage, 20% experience mental health difficulties; for children / young people who experience trauma, 40% experience mental health difficulties. The terminology “mental health” is not helpful as a label as some aspects of emotional wellbeing have environmental causes.

## **Workshops**

### **Workshop 1**

#### **Making sense of the past – a young person’s perspective - Taking the Participants on the Journey of a Child in Care - Kayleigh Jones**

*'Kayleigh was reading from her case example. It involved a 10-year-old girl called Willow who was taken into care and who experienced multiple changes of social workers, foster carers, placements. Each time she experienced a change, the IROs in the group passed a ball of wool to each other which created a complex web. This resulted in a visual representation of Willow’s journey in care.*

*Participant feedback - “Great presentations – ideas for meaningful participation. Workshop about child’s journey very powerful”.*

### **Workshop 2**

#### **Special Guardianship a complicated story - Placement support**

**Special Guardianship Workshop – Past Echoes – *looking after family history as it unfolds in Special Guardianships.***

*Mark Waddington is Director at [Placement Support](#) - a multi-disciplinary team combining specialists with wide experience of working and living with vulnerable children and families, with particular focus on the way children and those who care for them live together. He combines this role with doctoral research around inter-agency working.*

This workshop focused on the experience of Children and Special Guardians as they live together. When an SGO is granted, it will almost always follow a complicated



story that continues to reverberate for children and SGs going forward. The Workshop considered the impact of this for children and young people.

### Workshop 3

#### **Improving the quality and stability of children's lives: the role of the IRO and FIRO in foster carer reviews - Dr Helen Cosis Brown**

*Dr Helen Cosis Brown was a professor of Social Work at the Institute of Applied Social Research at the University of Bedfordshire. She runs seminars in Making Research Count and is currently an Agency decision maker for an IFA and chairs a Local authority adoption and fostering panel.*

The IRO role in Foster Carer reviews has not had much attention in spite of the fact that 73% of children and young people who were looked after on 31. 3. 2018 were in foster placements. Foster Carer reviews are a legally prescribed process. Their purpose is to:

- Take stock.
- Provide a rounded view about the quality of foster care being provided.
- Provide an opportunity to identify what has gone well; strengths and areas for development.
- Provide an opportunity to improve the quality of foster care.

Why are foster carer reviews so important?

- To look at the lived experience of that child and evaluate the experience of the child/ young person and the foster carer and their family.
- To provide not only an opportunity to look at the individual fostering household but also to identify themes across reviews that are pertinent to the quality of foster care more generally – for example the number of changes of Social Worker and Supervising (fostering) Social Worker.
- Foster carers should be seen as reparative family care. Being placed with foster carers is a major intervention in children's lives, so the quality is fundamentally important. Foster care is also a permanence option for children/ young people



### **Speaker 6 - Nigel Kelleher: What do we know about how the IRO service is viewed from court judgements?**

*Nigel Kelleher is a senior Lecturer in the Department of Social Work at Edge Hill University. He delivers a module in IRO practice.*

The speaker posed a question to the audience: what issue IROs nationally identified as being most important – what do you predict?

- New law regulations or Guidance?
- Create separate organisations?

The speaker presented findings from the analysis of 169 court judgments and 306 Ofsted reports.

The findings in relation to the courts were that they do understand the importance of the IRO role and that they also recognise that there are particular issues at play. They can see where challenge has been present and can differentiate the act of challenge from the impact of challenge.

### **Speaker 7 - Professor Julie Selwyn – Your life, Your care The subjective well – being of children in care (what does the Bright spots research tell us?)**

*Professor Julie Selwyn is a professor of Education and Adoption. She leads the Hadley programme of research within the Rees Centre at Oxford University. She is a member of the National Adoption and Special Guardianship Leadership Board. Julie was awarded a CBE for her work in 2015.*

10,000 secure online surveys with children and young people in care have been completed since 2016. Findings are available at <https://coramvoice.org.uk/for-professionals/bright-spots-2/bright-spots-publications/>

Young people who have a trusted adult in their lives, who feel safe and settled in placement, feel involved in decision making, understand why they are in care and feel happy with their appearance tend to have moderate to high well-being. Young people disliked the stigma associated with being in care and adults who drew attention to their care status. Positives were that 83% of young people reported that their lives were improving and most felt they had good opportunities. Many young people had experienced a high number of Social Worker allocation changes



and about 30% had no contact with either parent. The Bright Spot programme asks participating LAs to feedback to their young people a summary of their responses and the LA response 'You say..... We will.....'. In 2020 an evaluation is being undertaken in 10 LAs examining the impact of the survey on practice and policy.

### **Speaker 8 – Affinity Fostering - Child in care reviews considering young people's wishes**

Courtney and Adam from Affinity Fostering came to show and talk about the video that they were involved in making as part of Affinity Fostering young people's "Voices Group" with assistance from Become as part of the Passport to Parliament programme. The video, which was an animated cartoon, featured the Voices Group's own artwork. It was part of their campaign which included arguing against children and young people having their In-Care Reviews in school because it drew attention to their Looked After status.

### **Date of Next Conference**

**Thursday 18<sup>th</sup> March 2021**

**Does independence matter?**

**NAIRO 10<sup>th</sup> Conference**

**Location: Birmingham (Venue TBC)**