

Independent Reviewing Officers Annual Report 2013/2014

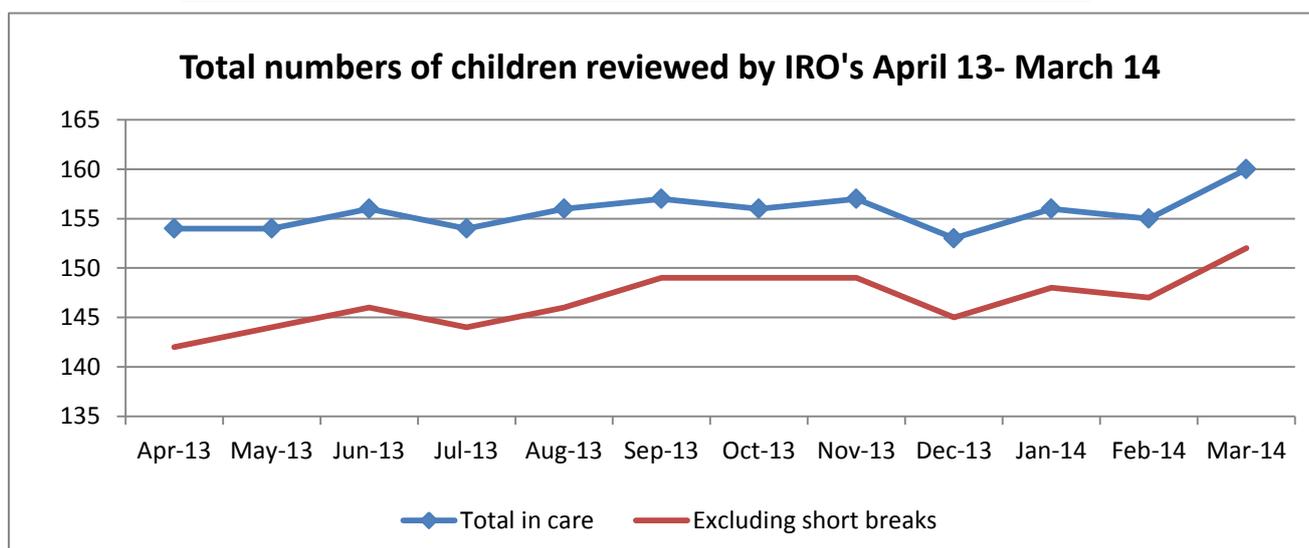
Introduction

1. This report is submitted under section 7.11 of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) handbook. The first section of this report adheres to the headings outlined in the handbook and the second section outlines the development and future planning of the Independent Reviewing Service (IRS). This report covers the period April 2013 to March 2014.

2. The Independent Reviewing service is part of the Children and Young People’s Strategy and Commissioning Division within People and Communities. The Safeguarding and Quality Assurance team is led by the Head of Children Safeguarding and Quality Assurance, and the Independent Reviewing Officers are managed directly by the Deputy Head of Safeguarding & Quality Assurance. With this comes the opportunity to be more ‘independent’ from the provider services within social care and hold services and agencies to account for the quality and standards of service they provide to children and young people in care. Since September 2013, Children and Young Peoples Strategy and Commissioning manage an internal Service Level Agreement with Children’s Social Care and, as this arrangement evolves, the quality assurance function, and the role of the IRO, will become increasingly key in monitoring our delivery services to children and young people in care.

3. During the period covered in this report -
 - 393 reviews have taken place
 - 12% of the total number of placements were more than 20 miles away from the local authority borders. Half of these placements were in residential schools or specialist schools.
 - 9 children or young people have been reviewed under short break arrangements
 - The average IRO caseload has been 62.5 pro rata for a full time IRO
 - During the period April 2013-14, the ethnicity of children and young people in care was as follows

| | Ethnicity | % of CiC |
|-----|------------------------------------|-----------------|
| 126 | White British | 84.6% |
| 5 | White - any other White background | 3.35% |
| 6 | Mixed - White and Black Caribbean | 4.0% |
| 7 | Black or Black British - Caribbean | 4.7% |
| 5 | Other | 3.35% |



In the last annual report covering the period April 2012/2013 issues were raised that were impacting on children in care. Some of the issues highlighted in the 2013 report have been quality assured in a series of audits carried out by the IROs from September – December 2013 and there will be a summary of those audits in the body of this report.

1. Local and National Context

Over the last 18 months two significant pieces of work have encouraged the IROs to consider their own practice and these challenges have been welcomed and have helped us to begin to work in a culture of “quality assurance”; the IRO Ofsted Thematic Inspection in 2013 and research led by the Principal Social Worker into young people’s experience of reviews. The National Children’s Bureau have published a final report “The role of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) in England” in March 2014 and the new Ofsted Framework has instigated a self- assessment work programme locally which the IROs are participating in. CAF/CASS have produced a National Protocol with IROs. There are now new guidelines for children placed for Adoption reviews and are currently formatting a new agenda for these reviews. The IROs attend a south West IRO forum and a similar forum exists for IRO Managers.

“Maria can deal with it cos I don’t like meetings. I just want to be a normal kid”

2. Service Delivery

The team has been in a period of development since July 2013 with a new manager in post and a revised permanent structure to support a renewed focus on developing a quality assurance service. It has been a positive period and 2014/15 will see further development of the service. The period since the last IRO report has seen the team deliver 100% of timeliness for reviews, undertake an audit cycle and influence the culture of quality assurance and monitoring.

The team had a successful away-day in November which enabled a focus on planning for the year ahead, to undertake work on systems and reviewed and updated the local dispute resolution policy. This has been followed up with a half day review to ensure consistency in our challenge processes.

The team comprises of 1 full time IRO who is a permanent member of staff with a dual function as an IRO and a child protection chair; 2 part time permanent officers, and 2 fixed term part-time IROs covering a secondment until December 2015. We have a full time administrator supporting the IROs. There is currently one male officer out of the 4 IROs and all are white British. The Deputy Head of Safeguarding is committed to establishing permanent status for as many of these posts as possible to ensure continuity for the children in care, to consolidate the value of this role within the People and Communities Department and to develop the quality assurance function of the IRO.

The IROs caseloads have generally remained within the recommended figures in the IRO Handbook, 60 per full time IRO. They have varied in order to cover periods of absence, vacancy and subsequent recruitment. This team is characterised by a “can do” attitude and a commitment to delivering a flexible service with the needs of children and young people at the forefront.

The IROs are responsible for National Indicator NI66, ensuring that Looked after Reviews happen within required timescales. Performance has been increasingly improving over the last two years and the IRO administration is generally notified in good time when a child is received into care. In the last two quarters this indicator has reported at 100% of reviews held on time. We are able to attribute this good practice to the IRS commitment to viewing reviewing as an activity which is completed as a process rather than one isolated review meeting being the measure of the service’s activity.

The IRO handbook highlights the importance of process reviews. These are seen as a way of making the review more children centred. This way the review can be tailored to the specific child. If they want to, the child can meet the IRO alone, chair their meeting, or take part in a section of the review popping

in and out as they can cope with. It also means that parents can be better “consulted” often in a second part to the meeting rather than just by paper consultation and professional input can be gaged and fed back in the most appropriate and least intrusive way. Hence we are able to conduct a very thorough review that is a child and parent centred process. The impact of this for the service is time. Holding three meetings instead of one is time consuming. The IRS is committed to this way of working however it is an area that does get affected by case loads. Essentially we see process reviews as best practice. An area of caution is that the process review should not be used as a way of delaying the review meeting or keeping timescales in place and this will require monitoring by the Deputy Head of Safeguarding. The IRS is currently writing a protocol for Process Reviews to ensure this is a transparent process which all partners understand and can sign up to. The IROs monitor the recommendations made at reviews mid-way between meetings which gives an oversight on progress and whether a child is being seen by their social worker.

The IRS is committed to monitoring the progress for children and young people placed outside of the authority area. The small number of children placed more than 20 miles away from the Bath and North East Somerset area can be particularly vulnerable being placed further from their home area and their professional networks and can be subject to more placement moves.

“Brilliant at understanding and meeting my needs”

3. Young People’s Participation

The ethos behind reviewing children’s care arrangements is that the process is as fully inclusive of the child and young person as possible. The IRO and the social worker will do what they can to prepare a child for their review and to promote the use of advocates wherever possible. IROs will chair meetings in a way that will include a child and to make it easier for them to participate and as many young people as possible are encouraged to chair their own reviews. This is on-going piece of work which the IRS has not prioritised this year and it will be explored further in 2014-15.

Prior to the review the children’s consultation form is sent to children from aged roughly 7 to 11 then the older young people get a longer consultation form. These have recently been amended following feedback from children and young people through the In-Care Council. All adults involved should also get a consultation form. Following the review those who attended and children and young people that are old enough, get a questionnaire / feedback form. The IRO will also make an effort to see the young person separately as well and the practice of the process review has developed considerably in the last year as a way of ensuring we hear the views of children, carers and family prior to the review meeting.

Participation for April 2013-2014

| Participation code | Participation type | Number | Percentage |
|---------------------------|--|---------------|-------------------|
| PN1 | Attends - participates verbally | 212 | 61.81% |
| PN2 | Attends - participates through advocate | 13 | 3.79% |
| PN3 | Attends - conveys views non verbally | 2 | 0.58% |
| PN4 | Attends - no contribution | 13 | 3.79% |
| PN5 | Does not attend - Advocate only | 13 | 3.79% |
| PN6 | Does not attend-facilitative medium | 14 | 4.08% |
| PN7 | Does not attend - no form of participation | 16 | 4.66% |
| BLANK | Missing | 0 | 0.00% |

PN4 data primarily relates to our disabled Children in Care. The IROs flagged a gap in collecting participation statistics for disabled children with our Care First colleagues. A participation code was

missing in the data collection process and this has been remedied and will give more accurate data about disabled children's participation.

In the January 2014-March 2014 quarterly report from Off the Record who provide the Advocacy Service in Bath and North East Somerset, young people continue to inform that they feel able to speak for themselves in their reviews and this has given them an increased understanding of the meetings and their confidence to do this.

The IROs have an established system for gaining direct feedback regarding the service from Children in Care, their families and from professionals through questionnaires sent out after reviews. The number of returns, particularly from children and young people, is low at 10% and we are reviewing the current processes for gathering this information and agreeing how to improve data collection to provide a much higher rate of return to inform performance and areas for improvement.

The IROs work supports the areas covered in the Bath and North East Somerset Pledge for Children in Care. The team ensure visits take place; actions are carried out; care plans are in place; contact is addressed at reviews; IROs support children and young people to be aspirational; they make sure health assessments are in place; that pathway plans are in place and that children are informed of their right to make a complaint.

4. Education

The local practice for children in care having PEPs continues to be very strong. They are consistently produced and are robust in content. The Virtual Head for Children in Care is a member of the Children in Care Quality Assurance Steering Group. School attendance for children in care in Bath and North East Somerset is high

5. Procedures for resolving concerns

The main function of the IRO is to ensure that care planning promotes good outcomes for children. An IRO will need to challenge children's social care decisions and it is inevitable that differences of opinion emerge. The IROs need to have an open dialogue with colleagues in social care and skills in relationship building and providing constructive challenge. These need to be supported by systems to support the resolution of concern.

The IROs and Service Managers in Children's Social Care updated the Dispute Resolution Policy in November 2013. This policy outlines the processes that the IROs will follow when there is an issue which needs to be resolved with colleagues in Children's Social Care. In addition specific cases and themes are discussed in the bi-annual Service Managers & IRO's (SMIRO) meetings. The IRO's collate any issues to the Divisional Director for Children and Young People's Specialist Services in a monthly report. Since May 2014, the IROs use a new monitoring form to oversee the process of quality assuring disputes or issues that have needed to be resolved with social care in order to track progress and avoid drift. This will enable the Deputy Head of Safeguarding to monitor the effectiveness of the IRO's challenge. The IROs record challenge on Care first when appropriate for the child's file.

For Children in Care, there is a clear complaints procedure. This is a direct way for children and other parties to raise concerns about the service. Children are made aware of this when they come into care and at subsequent reviews. During the period of this report, the numbers of children and young people making complaints is as follows-

Total number of children and young people making complaints – 3

Young people in care Section 20 making complaints – 1

Young people Leaving Care making complaints – 1.

The number of children and young people making complaints is low generally and the IROs are ideally placed to ensure they are aware of their right to be heard.

“Talk more about what I like, maybe?”

“I think it was good of (my IRO) to speed up because I was going to my Nan’s house and I was so excited.”

6. Quality assurance role and audit

The role of the IRO is to support the quality assurance function of the Safeguarding and Quality Assurance team and since the submission of the last IRO report progress has been made in further developing this role. Whilst developments have been made in the quality assurance functions of the service, there is on going work that needs to be done to consolidate and evidence the impact of the work we do and to demonstrate its contribution to improved outcomes for children and young people in care.

The IROS are represented on the Children in Care Quality Assurance Sub Group and participate in the audits completed for each meeting. To date since August 2013, this Quality Assurance group has audited children and young people placed out of the local authority; BME/other diversity; disabled children and young people; short breaks; transitions for teenagers.

Further to this, the IROs have undertaken a series of thematic audits from August-December 2013 and these are outlined below.

i. Care plans

The IRO Annual report 2013 raised the following concerns about Care Plans for Children in Care

1. The lack of up to date Care Plans
2. Quality of care plans
3. Lack of consistent understanding about the process of completing and updating Care Plans

To provide detail around this concern an audit was completed in September 2013 to look at both the timeliness and quality of Care Plans and to see if this is fit for purpose. This audit provided detailed qualitative and quantitative information on 30 current cases across the spectrum.

The auditor found that there was not a clear process for Social Workers updating Care Plans. Key changes from reviews are not captured in the subsequent Care Plan. It was the auditor’s view that the Care Planning process was not being given the attention it should for a significant number of Children in Care. The implications of this are significant for children and their families and can lead to confusion, lack of transparency and a delay in accessing services. It is difficult for a child to feel ownership of their plan or that it has much meaning if it is out of date and not based on a true picture of their situation.

Since this audit, the IRO service has met with the Divisional Director for Children and Young People’s Specialist Service and the Service Manager for Care Outcomes and together have highlighted ways to rectify systems, quality and compliance issues. The IROs provided up to date lists of case where there no care plan or an out of date care plan and this is being rectified. There has been a working group about Care Plans rectifying the system issues as part of a wider piece of work being undertaken by the commissioner for Children’s Social Care. From April 2014 all children have care plans in care and a system for capturing these in time and updating them regularly is progressing. In the interim period, a new Care Plan has been designed for CareFirst and all social workers are using this. This is a really positive change and has been welcomed widely.

ii. Pathway Plans

In December 2013 the IRS undertook an audit of Pathway Plans and found that out of the 28 children in care in Bath and North East Somerset Council aged 16+, 15 had Pathway Plans in place. The auditor found that some plans did not reflect the current situation for the young person and of were of variable

quality. This audit did not look in detail at the quality or timeliness of Pathway Plans and we intend to return to this piece of work and would welcome the opportunity to do this jointly with colleagues in Children's Social Care. The timing for the Pathway planning often occurs when young people are revising or taking GCSEs so needs to be carefully scheduled to avoid overloading the young person at this stressful time in their lives. This is a process which needs run alongside the care plan so that when a child reaches the age of 15/16 it is a natural progression rather than a completely different piece of work.

"Don't mind really if you want me there. I will but I don't like lots of meetings"

iii. Diversity

A short quantitative audit was completed in August 2013 to gain a snapshot of how issues are being addressed for black and minority ethnic and disabled children in care to meet their individual needs. These issues have been flagged at each inspection of the service and hence are a priority for monitoring. The auditors found:

- a) That for BME children audited, **13 out of 16** had their identity needs addressed in Social Work reports to the LAC review.
- b) That for BME children audited **15 out of 16** had their identity needs addressed in IRO review reports.
- c) That for disabled children, **9 out of 10 children** had their identity needs addressed by both Social Work reports to the LAC review and in IRO minutes of those reviews.

There was a further qualitative audit completed in November 2013 which looked at identity issues for children in minority groups. This revealed that a child's ethnicity was not always recorded by social workers, and even when it was there were not always details of their cultural background. There were paragraphs in reports that recorded identity needs, however these were deleted if left blank, and would not reappear for correction in future reports. There was sometimes a lack of recording detailing how cultural needs were met and supported by both social workers and carers. Gaps were also identified that highlighted the lack of ethnic minority carers and no plan in place to address this. The IROs had concerns about how cultural divides were overcome when children live in a different community from the cultural heritage and facilities were not available to address this. One suggestion was that the local authority could be more proactive in using mentors from similar background to the children, and also more training could be provided for carers and social workers on identity and cultural needs. Since this audit was undertaken, the Social care workforce have had the benefit of working with SARI and the Principal Social Worker is leading on promoting awareness and assessment of diversity needs.

"It was boring, dull, pointless & rubbish. Nothing was really about me"

iv. Health Assessments

The annual report of 2013 highlighted an improvement in good quality and timely health assessments since 2012. The IRO's have also established an on-going dialogue with colleagues in health which is very helpful. IROs liaise with a range of health professionals from the Designated Nurse for children in care, the Designated Paediatrician for children in care, to school nurses and the Lifetime Service.

The IRS carried out an audit in August 2013 on Health Assessments. This audit was carried out on 30 cases of children in care in Bath and North East Somerset in the month of August 2013. Health Assessments were raised at previous OFSTED inspections and this is an area for on-going monitoring.

- The expectation is that children in care receive a Health Assessment in the first month of their care

- The expectation is that for children under 5 years old they receive a Health Assessment every 6 months. Every child over 5 years old will receive a Health Assessment each year

Auditors found that:

- The data for children received into care the 7 months preceding the audit indicated that over half have their health assessment in place by first review. 4 out of 11 children waited until second review and beyond for their health assessment. This shows us that there is a vast improvement in the number of children who have their health assessment completed by first review. This is an impressive outcome with room for improvement.
- The data for children who have been in care for over a year shows that almost 100% have their health assessments completed within expected frequency. Only one child out of 19 audited did not have their health assessment in place within expected timescales. Again this is a very impressive outcome for our children in care in this group showing vast improvement in this snapshot.

v. **CAMHS Provision**

The IRO Annual Report 2012 -2013 highlighted the issue of children placed outside of the authority area and some shortfalls in them receiving services from their local CAMHS. In response to this in November 2013 the IRO service conducted an audit of 14 out of 82 children placed outside the boundaries of Bath and North East Somerset. The auditor found that 6 of the 14 children assessed as needing CAMHS services were not in receipt of services. This audit highlighted some gaps in how these children receive services from CAMHS. The Local Safeguarding Children Board was concerned by this and asked for specific detail which CAMHS was tasked to review. CAMHS and Children’s Social Care have instigated quarterly meetings any issues concerning children in care will be addressed therein. There are also examples of good high quality and timely services.

7. **Feedback from Children and Young People**

Children and young people are consulted before and after their review meetings and throughout the review process. We have listened to feedback that children and young people have given and have negotiated that Independent Fostering Agency social workers do not attend reviews unless the children and young people request their presence and we have developed practice to be more inclusive by approaching reviews as a process rather than one meeting. We are increasingly giving children and young people the choice to plan how they want their review meetings to be and to chair them. This year we have acted on feedback from the in-care council and amended the consultation forms that children and young people complete prior to reviews and the questionnaires after. We are currently working with a student social worker who will analysis themes from recent feedback and help us shape our future practice into 2014-15. Children and young people are asked a variety of questions in both these forms which they generally fill in quite positively demonstrating that they feel listened to but frequently comment that they don’t enjoy and feel they benefit from the review. A selection of these comments appears in this report.

Postcards have recently been created to be sent out with children in care information packs. The postcard features a photograph of the child’s IRO and a brief explanation of what their role will be. It is hoped that this will help the child or young people identify with their IRO and feel prepared for when the IRO appears in their life.

“When you said “do you plan to take part in your next review?” I am still deciding yes or no but for now I put yes.”
“I don’t think my IRO could do any better than he already is”

SO WHAT?

HOW HAS THE IRO MADE A DIFFERENCE FOR CHILDREN IN CARE?

The IROs have discharged their responsibilities under the Care Planning, Placement and Case review responsibilities under the Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations and have ensured that all children in care have been reviewed. On a day to day basis we believe that we make a difference in specific ways for Children in Care. This can be evidenced in the child's record. More generally we make a difference for all children in care by identifying themes which impact on these children's lives and raising these to improve services. This is evidenced in Audits/SMIRO/IRO report/Team Meetings. As a service we have wanted to raise our profile and impact in the People and Communities department. In the last 6 months we have addressed a number of key areas:

1. We have continued our meetings with Social Work teams to clarify our role and processes for Children in Care. This means that we are kept better informed about Children's lives and significant changes. As a result we can step in to affect change through the monitoring and review process
2. We have had representation on a number of working groups: for example, What does good look like, the Care first Working group – to influence and bring the voice of the child into all processes. The IRO service is in a unique position to do this, seeing the breadth of children in care from all children's social care teams.
 - We have taken note of the research that was done last year about children in care in Bath and North East Somerset and have taken steps to alter the way we work to make the review process more child focussed. Children highlighted that they did not want IFA Social Workers in their reviews. We have responded to this by drawing up a policy with the IFA's around this so that Fostering Social Workers do not attend unless invited by the child
 - The research about reviews also guided our team to increase the use of Process Reviews so that each review can be tailored around that child. This has meant extra work for the team, seeing the child separately, parents also in the process
 - We have designed and are sending out post cards to new children in care with a photo of their IRO and explanation of our role and contact details
3. We have introduced a system of sending review recommendations to Managers after each review for ratification. These are then seen as actions and now recorded as such in the papers for the next review. This means that all key parties are aware of and in agreement about the actions. This means that children have important issues addressed from the review as it is seen and followed up in supervision between SW and Managers.
4. We have followed up children's feedback (CIC council) regarding the consultation forms for reviews. These have been redesigned in line with children's suggestions.
5. We have worked with our CareFirst team to establish a system of monitoring reports to reviews on time and manager sign off. This has improved compliance for paperwork to the review and allows better preparation so that the review is useful and child centred.
6. Areas: Care Plans; diversity and identity issues; Health Plans and CAMHS provision for children placed outside Bath and North East Somerset. These audits have furthermore helped us to guide planning our own development as a service and direct us to further work for 2014-15.

8. Areas for consideration and future development

i. Life Story Work

For all children understanding their past is an essential component in forming a strong identity, positive self-esteem, and good cognitive functioning. Children in care often have fragmented histories therefore it is essential that this work is prioritised by social workers and it is often only children placed for adoption who receive a quality service in exploring their history. Therefore it is part of the IRO role to promote life story work and to contribute to developing identity for children and young people in care.

ii. Short Breaks

Children on Short Breaks were the subject of the Children in Care Quality Assurance Steering Group multi-agency meeting in April 2014. Over the next twelve months, we would like to undertake an audit of children and young people who are on short breaks and ensure those on S20 are benefitting from appropriate co-ordinated health, care and education planning in line with the Short Break protocol.

9. Work plan for 2014 -15 and areas for IRO focus

The IRS made good progress on goals set in the last report and is preparing the team's contribution to the Children's Strategy and Commissioning team plan. This is the outline of our work programme for April 2014 to April 2015.

1. The IRS is already involved in a self-assessment working group in response to latest Ofsted Inspection schedule. As we plan to embark on a fresh cycle of audits, we propose to focus on the "spotlight" groups that Ofsted highlights which includes:
 - Child sexual exploitation
 - Education of children in care
 - Children living out of area
 - Quality of work with children when they return to area
2. The IRS will continue to ensure that the voice of the child is central to all review notes and recording and promote for the inclusion of Life Story work for children and young people.
3. The Deputy Head of Safeguarding will ensure the IROs are using consistent systems for recording challenge and will undertake and audit of the challenges undertaken.
4. The IRS will evaluate and develop young people's participation in their review process and continue to support and enable young people to chair their own reviews when appropriate.
5. The IRS will work in collaboration with the SEND work programme to ensure plans for children in care with disabilities are delivered to expectation.
6. With colleagues in children's social care, the IRS will review how we use the short break's policy and ensure we are working together to deliver the best service to these children and young people.
7. The IROs will continue to audit cases using themes from the most recent cycle as part of on-going quality assurance and supporting colleagues with maintaining improvements, alongside the introduction of new areas, for example, we want to focus on young people in the youth justice system, a group of young people who often experience a lack of placement availability and stability.
8. In the year ahead, the service needs to make more active use of young people's feedback and continue to learn from this and adapt the service accordingly. Work is underway to make the children in care's information pack more up to date.
9. The IRS will continue to promote the use of advocacy for children and young people in care and ensure that the complaints procedure is promoted whenever possible.

Jackie Deas
Deputy Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance

May 2014
(Amended Jan 15)