



Family Services

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Service Structure and Delivery

The Independent Reviewing Service is managed within the Safeguarding, Quality Assurance and Workforce Development Service to ensure that the Independent Reviewing Officers' (IRO's) input and contribution to social work practice and care planning for children and young people is distinct from case holding service areas. The Head of Service for Quality Assurance and Safeguarding has a direct line of accountability to the Executive Director of Children's Services.

IROs' play an important role in ensuring that the local authority fulfils its responsibilities as Corporate Parent for the children it looks after by ensuring that they receive a good service that meets their range of needs and are provided with safe, stable care that enables them to flourish and achieve. IROs' provide quality assurance of children and young peoples' care plans by monitoring the effectiveness and progress of care planning, alongside, providing challenge to the professional systems responsible for supporting children and young people in care as necessary.

The IRO's core functions, tasks and responsibilities are set in statutory guidance section (25B(1), 1989 Act): The IRO Handbook: Statutory Guidance for Independent Reviewing Officers and local authorities on their functions in relation to case management and review for Looked After Children (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010).

This sets out requirements for chairing the child's review and monitoring the child's case on an ongoing basis as below:

- Monitor the performance by the local authority of their functions in relation to the child's case;
- Alert senior managers of identified areas of poor practice or patterns of concern;
- Recognise and report on good practice
- Participate in any review of the child's case;
- Promote the voice of the child and ensure that any ascertained wishes and feelings of the child concerning the case are given due consideration by the appropriate authority;
- Ensure the care plan for the child is informed by an up to date assessment and fully reflects the child's current needs and that actions are set out in the plan are consistent with the local authority's legal responsibilities towards the child.
- Prevent drift in care planning and delivery of services to children
- Make sure that children's care plans given proper consideration and weight to their wishes and feelings, and that they understand the implications of any changes made to his/her care plan.
- Ensure children understand how an advocate can help

The IRO Team is comprised of four permanent full-time Independent Reviewing Officers and one Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer who chairs annual foster carer reviews who are supervised by the Principal Independent Reviewing Officer. There is one dedicated Conference and Reviewing Support Officer who supports the team. Additionally, two providers have been commissioned to provide additional IRO capacity when required.

The service has recently taken strategic responsibility (and line management) for two Child Participation Officers to increase the opportunities for collaboration and coproduction with children and young people.

Statutory Guidance recommends that IROs hold caseloads of between 50 to 70 Looked After Children, to deliver a good quality of service that includes the full range of functions set out in the IRO handbook. Caseloads have remained within statutory guidelines and average 62-65 per IRO.

Annual performance 2019/20

For the 338 children that were in care in the reporting period 2019/20; the data and performance indicators show:

- 96.6% of Looked After Children Reviews were held within statutory timescales
- 91.3% of children and young people participated in their Children in Care reviews.

There is an increase in children that were in care in the reporting period 2018/19 (13 children); alongside a slight increase in reviews held in statutory timescales (from 93.6) and a slight decrease in child participation (from 94%).

Ofsted inspection findings in July 2019 states that IRO oversight in most cases is good and IRO's are providing appropriate challenge and escalate concerns when necessary, which has resulted in better planning for children. It was recognised that statutory reviews are taking place regularly and the use of midway reviews and tracking was increasing but this needs to be more consistently evidenced on case files.

Ofsted Inspection findings published in July 2019 note "In most cases, oversight of children's progress by independent reviewing officers (IROs) is good and is recorded in children's records. Statutory reviews are held regularly, with increasing use of mid-point reviews. IROs are appropriately challenging and escalate concerns when necessary, which has resulted in better planning for children" The report recognised improvements in children's outcomes and acknowledged that care planning was clear, focused and included realistic actions and timescales. A need to ensure assessments were updated to inform plans for children with complex needs or when their circumstances have significantly changed was further noted and this developed has remained under scrutiny through management oversight, performance data and quality assurance reports.

Child Participation

Promote the voice of the child and ensure that any ascertained wishes and feelings of the child concerning the case are given due consideration by the appropriate authority;

A key priority for the year was to fully embed the Child Participation model and in line with the previous year workshops/forums were held with young people to obtain their views and suggestions about how we could improve the services provided and to encourage their meaningful participation. A new child friendly consultation booklet and record of the review were re-designed in collaboration with young people.

-The consultation booklet and was implemented in May 2019 with an electronic version becoming available in July 2019.

-From 1st December 2019, the record of review is written in the form of a letter to the child or young person in simple language according to the child's age and level of understanding.

-Many of the young people who took part in the initial workshops/forums have since transitioned to the Onwards and Upwards Service and the service has been identifying and engaging with different children and young people to enhance child participation and feedback. Two events (bowling) were held in October and December 2019 with children and young people aged between 7-17 years.

-Feedback from the IRO's is that the young people engaged positively outside the formal setting of a review and enjoyed the events. However, it was recognised that the age range was too varied to get meaningful engagement from the younger cohort.

-Older children were able to freely give feedback about their experiences in care and clear views about their care plans.

- Future events will take place three times a year (February, May and October half terms) and be split into specific age ranges. In addition, IRO's will identify young people who they feel will benefit from being taken out individually at midway points and young people who are reluctant to attend their reviews.

Focus on Care Planning

Ensure the care plan for the child is informed by an up to date assessment and fully reflects the child's current needs and that actions are set out in the plan are consistent with the local authority's legal responsibilities towards the child.

Continued focused activity has taken place during the year to improve the quality of care planning and the participation of children and young people in their reviews. Consultation and joint working between social work teams and IRO's in the care planning process is now embedded and respectful challenge is well established.

In line with the Ofsted recommendation 2019, to update assessments of need when circumstances change for children in care, there has been continued focus on the implementation of the 'All About Me' assessment/care plan as this requires the voice of the child to be evidenced throughout their care planning. Performance data reflects the efforts being made to enable children and young people to participate in their reviews and contribute to their care plans and pathway plans directly or indirectly.

When there is a need to drive improvements in a child's care planning, IRO challenge is clear and consistent and is evidenced in discussions, emails and/or face-to-face meetings with the social work teams and in escalation reports. As with the previous year, most escalations are in relation to process issues and resolution in most cases is swift. When raised, practice alerts are being addressed quickly by the social workers and team managers.

Prevent drift in care planning and delivery of services to children

IRO's are engaging in robust conversations with social work teams and partner agencies and this is ensuring that any potential for drift is reduced and issues are mostly resolved in a timely manner. Where there is the need for formal escalation, this is tracked, monitored by the Principal Reviewing Officer and where necessary escalated to Heads of Service.

Alert senior managers of identified areas of poor practice or patterns of concern & recognise and report on good practice

The Principal Reviewing Officer provides focused feedback and support to ensure that IRO's provide appropriate and respectful challenge to professionals when care plans are not sufficiently addressing or progressing the support children need to achieve good outcomes. Appropriate escalation of concerns is evidenced as necessary leading to timely resolution. The IRO also provides feedback on good practice to ensure social workers are clear that their work is having a positive impact on outcomes for the child.

IRO Footprint

Monitor the performance by the local authority of their functions in relation to the child's case

The Principal Reviewing Officer attends the weekly Permanence Tracker Meeting, weekly Permanency Planning Panel and monthly Vulnerable Adolescents at Risk Panel; this enables the IRO service to contribute to planning, provide positive feedback and/or raise concerns about progression of permanency for the children and young people who are discussed.

The All About Me Assessment is now fully embedded into the case recording system but is not always available for reviews. In most cases there is discussion between the IRO and the social work team prior to the review to ensure the information sharing is up-to-date and the IRO is aware of any developments in the case.

2020/21 Priorities

Child Participation Model

Make sure that children's care plans given proper consideration and weight to their wishes and feelings, and that they understand the implications of any changes made to his/her care plan

A key priority for the year ahead is to continue working with children and young people in the quarterly workshops/forums being held to hear their views and suggestions about how we can improve services provided to them and encourage their meaningful participation. Also, to increase the collection and recording of parent and service user feedback to help improve services and where appropriate build relationships with them to support the children and young people they are involved with.

IRO Practice Development

There is a need to ensure that all IRO's continue to develop their capacity to drive high quality care planning activity and to monitor the effectiveness of children's plans by providing respectful and robust challenge to professionals when plans are not achieving good outcomes for children, and to do so consistently.

The IRO's are being supported to achieve these aims through increased levels of supervision - both formal and informal, and group supervision. In addition, IRO's have attended training not only specific to the role but also to the role of social worker to ensure any knowledge is current. Knowledge gained from training days will be shared across the IRO service and wider service where relevant. The Principal Reviewing Officer works with the Practice Development Team to support the IRO's practice through learning.

The Principal Reviewing Officer is quality assuring the IRO's work through comprehensive review of minutes looking at quality, detail and if an accurate picture of the child's care arrangements has been recorded. There will be ongoing live observation of the IRO's chairing reviews to give feedback and support learning.

Data is used to support management oversight and the development of the IRO service. This includes individual performance data and the monitoring of statutory 6 requirements i.e. timescales of decisions and minutes to prevent practice falling below expected standards.

In line with the Ofsted recommendation 2019 and the requirement for IRO's to promote advocacy support for children in care, there has been increased focus in this area to ensure that IRO's are routinely ensuring that they are ensuring children understand how an advocate can help and enabling access to an advocate as required.

IRO Workshops

CIC process workshops facilitated by IROs' were due to commence in April 2020 but have been put on hold due to the Covid-19 lockdown. These will now be completed as a digital training offer supported by the Principal Independent Reviewing Officer and Workforce Development Team. The workshops will focus on children in care processes and care planning with an emphasis of the timescales, expectations and process for the All About Me assessments and plans.

Conclusion

The Independent Reviewing Service in Barnet continues to develop and the child participation model has contributed to a more inclusive and child-centred service. The views of children and young people are central to the changes to practice and the model has had a significant positive impact upon the relationships between children and their IRO's. There IRO footprint is more evident in cases and where appropriate, respectful challenge to drive improvements in care planning for children is taking place.

The relationship between the IRO service and the social work teams has improved significantly during the last year due to the individual IRO links to the social work teams and improved communication between partner agencies i.e. Children's Guardians and the Virtual School. This is providing a stronger framework for collaboration between professionals in driving care planning which is leading to good outcomes for children.

Challenge provided by IRO's is being positively received and responded to. Practice alerts are responded to quickly which is reducing the need for formal escalation and improving working relationships. There is a need to ensure that IRO escalations remain focused on driving continued improvements in the quality and timeliness of decisions made and actions agreed in children's reviews.

The focus for the IRO service this year is to continue to develop in line with children and young people's wishes and input and to ensure that all midway tracking and contact is recorded robustly. The focus on advocacy support will continue until this can be demonstrated as routine in practice. Bespoke practice development and training will be implemented to support evidencing the impact that IRO's they have on the circumstances and experience of the children that they are involved with.