



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 has a direct line of accountability to the Executive Director of Children's Services: they meet regularly to review any practice concerns independently.

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 within the Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations Volume 2: care planning, placement and case review (June 2015) and, the IRO Handbook: Statutory Guidance for Independent Reviewing Officers and local authorities which sets out their functions in relation to case management and review for Looked After Children (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010).

The role of the IRO is to improve care planning and secure better outcomes for Looked After Children. They do this by chairing the child's reviews and monitoring the child's case on an ongoing basis with particular attention to:

- 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

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 60 - 65 cases per IRO.

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 Administrator who supports the team. In addition to the permanent IRO's two commissioned providers deliver additional capacity (3 IRO's) as and when required. This ensures the IRO team can be flexible and responsive to the changing needs of the service.

Annual performance 2020/21

For the 330 children that were in care in the reporting period 2020/21; the data and performance indicators show:

- 97.5% of Looked After Children Reviews were held within statutory timescales
- 94.0% of children and young people participated in their Children in Care reviews.

There is a slight increase on 2019/20 performance in reviews held in statutory timescales (from 96.6%) and a positive increase in child participation (from 91.3%).

There was an overall increase in the number of children in care in the reporting period 2020/21. The highest the number of children and young people in care at any one time reached 342 and is currently at 335 – this is average figure as reported in the 2019/20 annual report.

During the Covid-19 pandemic additional IRO support from the commissioned providers was utilised due to staff illness and bereavement leave, as opposed to the small rise in children looked after.

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.

-The All About Me Assessment is fully embedded into the case recording system. In most cases the All About Me assessment/care plan is updated and available for the IRO prior to the review and 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 child's circumstances. Performance, audit data and tracking reflect the positive efforts being made by social work practitioners to ensure the All About Me assessments are updated before reviews.

-The All About Me assessment/care plan requires the voice of the child to be evidenced throughout their care planning, alongside updating any change in circumstances and the child's needs. The IRO service notes that children and young people's plans mostly reflect current needs and they have been able to participate in their reviews and contribute to their care plans and pathway plans directly or indirectly.

-Most challenge provided by IRO's is positively received and responded to by social work teams. Challenge is clear and consistent and is evidenced in discussions, emails and virtual meetings with the social work teams and where necessary, in escalation reports.

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

-The increased communication and consultation between the IRO's and social work teams has led to fewer practice alerts which when raised, have been swiftly addressed which also means a significantly reduced number of formal escalations.

-In the reporting period there were 14 formal escalations. Just over half the escalations (8) were related to processes, i.e. care plans not being updated by the social workers, preventing IRO's from completing planning outcomes on LCS.

- The remaining escalations were a mixture of practice, planning and recording: one was in relation to a UASC young person being left without subsistence or support from a provider over a weekend; one was about a care plan not meeting the needs of a young person; one was relation to unprofessional practice by an interpreter; one was in relation to concerns about a foster carer's practice; one where the mother had concerns about the placement which required follow up by the social work team and one was due to the lack of visits recorded on the child's file.

-Unregulated placements are noted to occur for a variety of different reasons (connected carers are not positively assessed but care plans are court directed, Regulation 24 placements have not progressed to panel for matching, semi-independent placements or placements for children with complex needs) and are monitored through the reviewing process, alongside scrutiny by senior management permanency and tracking panels. Overall, risk assessments are reported to be completed, the quality of care provided in unregulated placements is mostly positive, but practice would be strengthened by a more robust approach to timeframes for placement matching processes.

-Also, there is evidence of IRO challenging care planning that is incongruent with the wishes and feelings of the child and ensuring children and young people's voices are well represented.

-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.

-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.

Prevent drift in care planning and delivery of services to children

The IRO service are focussed on preventing drift in care planning and delivery of services and are able to evidence impact on case planning and positive outcomes for young people. Examples of this can be evidenced and include issues such as IRO's challenging Section 20 arrangements when required in order to progress permanency and longer-term placement /legal planning.

-The decrease in escalations in relation to drift in care planning can be attributed to the increased collaboration between the IRO service and the Corporate Parenting Service which ensures care plans are updated in a timely manner which supports the progression of plans and practice.

-The Covid-19 lockdown has seen a significant increase in communication and consultation between the IRO's and social work teams and partner agencies. Joint working between the IRO's and social work teams is firmly established and IRO's are now routinely invited to permanency planning meetings, professional meetings, the Vulnerable Adolescents at Risk Panel and Child Exploitation and Missing planning meetings.

-Steps have being made to further embed the working relationship between the IRO service and Assessment, Intervention & Planning Service (AIP). The IRO's linked to the AIP service are being invited to team meetings on a regular basis, alongside a bi-monthly forum chaired by an Assistant Head of Service to discuss any themes arising, best practice, escalations and encourage a systemic approach to working relationships.

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;

The pandemic has had a marked impact on the quality of participation of children and young people in their reviews. Although, child participation increased due to the delivery of virtual meetings (and lockdown periods) the IRO's observed that quality of meaningful and helpful participation by children in their reviews was varied.

-Children under the age of five were a particularly challenging cohort to build relationships as without direct observations of their relationships with carers, IRO's have been more dependent on the views of other professionals (e.g. carers, nurseries and social workers) to inform their views of the quality of care received in placements and their experiences of contact, where relevant. Young children found the virtual platforms confusing and are limited for observing relationships and quality of interactions.

-The quality of participation from older primary school aged children (5-12 years) was slightly better but children expressed that they disliked engaging with their IRO's through virtual means (laptops, social media, telephone) often stating they preferred to talk face-to-face and tended to sit out of view of the camera. Some children responded to more creative ways of engagement such as being asked to give a virtual tour of their bedroom or playing a

game but the limited opportunities to observe a child in their environment and gain their views in a relationship-based context was a challenge.

-Secondary school aged children were much more comfortable and willing to engage in the virtual platforms with all the professionals present. There was an overall preference by young people to have a 1:1 conversation with their IRO and they needed encouragement to share information in the virtual meetings. IRO's and other professionals present were able to feedback their wishes and feelings.

-Due to security reasons, those young people on remand could not take part in a virtual review and reviews were more difficult to schedule with youth justice facilities due to the pandemic. However, all but one young person on remand was spoken to by their IRO for the purpose of their reviews and their wishes and feelings reflected in the review process.

-Prior to the pandemic a priority for the IRO service was to continue to develop and embed our child participation model by engaging more children and holding age appropriate activities and events chosen by them. Event days were planned to take place during the May, October and February half terms in 2020/21. In addition to event days, IRO's had planned to provide one to one activity in the community for young people who are reluctant to attend their reviews or participate in group activities. Lockdown restrictions coupled with child and professional anxieties (around transmission of Covid-19) meant children and young people were not afforded the opportunity to engage with their respective IRO's outside of the formal reviewing process. While virtual 1:1 interaction did take place the feedback, ideas and views of children for ways to improve service delivery and their experiences was limited. It was a challenge for children to see beyond the current situation, the demands of online learning and virtual visits and their predominant message was for a return to 'real life meetings'. Face to face activities in smaller age appropriate groups are been planned for the summer holidays with children suggesting a variety of options, e.g., picnics, go-carting, Go-Ape and going to the seaside.

-A newly designed consultation booklet for children to give their views had been co-produced with children just prior to the lockdown. However, completion of the consultation booklet (hard copy and electronic) during the pandemic has been minimal. The use of the electronic version was not prioritised by IRO's given the views and frustrations expressed by children and young people about their experiences of virtual platforms. However, children's verbal feedback and views are recorded and appropriately responded to at every opportunity.

-The personalised record of review written to children in letter form has been in use for this period and IRO's and practitioners have reported positive feedback about this. Children, carers and partner agencies have commented on the less formal nature of the letter, the use of child friendly (and age appropriate) language and, particularly, the personalisation of content.

- Ensure children understand how an advocate can help

The IRO service, alongside the social work practitioners, have explained the advocate role to children and young people and encouraged participation with the advocates and independent visitors available to them through the commissioned services. The utilisation of advocates has increased and feedback during reviews from children and young people is generally positive about their experience of advocacy.

IRO Footprint

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

There is clear evidence of increased IRO oversight on children's records. As outlined above IRO's provide appropriate challenge and escalate concerns when necessary which contributes to robust and timely planning for children. Despite the challenges presented by the pandemic statutory reviews are taking place regularly and within timescale. Midway reviews are routinely scheduled at statutory reviews and recorded on children's files once they have taken place, along with case discussions involving the IRO.

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.

2020/21 Priorities

Child Participation Model

-A key priority for the year ahead following the lifting of the Covid-19 lockdown restrictions is to safely resume face-to-face statutory reviews in the children's placements, particularly for those children and young people who were newly accommodated during the Covid-19 lockdown period.

-to encourage the completion of the consultation booklets to capture their views and suggestion about the care plan.

-to resume co-produced participation events with children to strengthen their opportunities for participation, alongside, working closely with the Service Development Officer to use child and parent feedback to help improve services offered to children 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 supervision - both formal and informal, and group supervision. Safeguarding training provided for the workforce is attended by the IRO's but a priority for the year ahead is for the Principal Independent Reviewing Officer to work with the Workforce Development Team to create internal training seminars, alongside, training specific to the role of the IRO from external providers. Knowledge gained from training days will be shared across the IRO service and wider service where relevant.

-The Principal Reviewing Officer will continue to support the IRO's practice through performance data, quality assuring the IRO's case recording and the letters of review and 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.

IRO Workshops

-CIC process workshops facilitated by IROs' were placed on hold during the Covid-19 lockdown. These workshops will be completed as an online training offer and will now commence in on 8.07.21. 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

Communication and consultation between IRO's, social work teams and partner agencies has increased significantly and contributes to robust care planning and outcomes for children and young people.

The IRO footprint is more evident in cases on the system: midway tracking and case discussions are recorded. Respectful challenge to drive improvements in care planning for children is positively received and responded which is evidenced in the reduction in practice alerts and formal escalations.

The key focus for the IRO is to resume face-to-face review meetings and events to develop their relationships with their children and young people. Bespoke practice development, training, child participation and using service user feedback to inform service development will be the key priorities for 2021/22.