



Family Services

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Introduction

An annual report of the Independent Reviewing Service for looked after children is required to be produced and published in accordance with the Children and Young Persons Act 2008, and the statutory guidance of the Independent Reviewing Officer's (IRO) Handbook (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010.)

The report provides a summary of the service activity and delivery by the IRO Service in Barnet for the period 1st April 2023 to 31st March 2024

Service 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 progress on an ongoing basis with particular attention to:

- Monitor the performance by the local authority of their functions in relation to the child's care.
- 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 circumstances.
- Promote the voice of the child and ensure that any ascertained wishes and feelings of the child concerning their care 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 give 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. The size of the caseload is not indicative of the workload for each IRO as caseloads are weighted by wider responsibilities, the number children placed Out of Borough, large family groups, the child's range of needs and any disability, unaccompanied asylum seekers (UASC) and the complexity of individual children. To ensure manageability and quality of practice, caseloads have remained within statutory guidelines at an average of 60-65 children per permanent IRO and an agreed maximum of thirty-five children per contracted IRO.

The McAllister Independent Social Care Review (2022) proposes that the IRO role should be withdrawn. Barnet supports the Department for Education (DfE) 2023 response that the role should be reviewed and strengthened but not diminished. The social care review suggested that IRO capacity to be truly independent was compromised as they are employed by the local authority, as such could not effectively advocate for children.

The National Organisation for IROs (NAIRO) stresses the importance of the IRO role in considering the child's best interests in context of the child's views, family views and professional views, to provide a holistic professional position especially when views vary.

Barnet enables our IRO's to respectfully challenge and provide vital independent oversight on children's care planning arrangements. The use of independent advocates is widely encouraged, as is the voice of children and young people in our care. This report will set out how Barnet's IRO's are supporting these important functions.

Service Structure

The IRO Team in Barnet is comprised of four permanent full-time Independent Reviewing Officers and one Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer (FIRO) who chairs annual foster carer reviews, who are supervised by the Principal Independent Reviewing Officer. The FIRO reports to the fostering service and does not review any children's care arrangements under an IRO function.

In addition to the permanent IRO's, there are currently four IRO's utilised via our contracted provider Aidhour Ltd and one freelance IRO who has been working for Barnet for many years who provide additional support to the service as and when required.

Contract meetings take place quarterly with our commissioning team, and includes the Aidhour Operations Managers, the Head of Safeguarding and the Principal IRO manager and the Conference and Review Support Manager. Agenda items focus on the performance of the contracted IRO's, quality, and active contribution into service developments and information sharing.

During the reporting year, there were two vacant permanent IRO posts which have both been successfully recruited to. One postholder started in January 2024. The other postholder is an existing contractor who has worked for Barnet for four years, her decision to join the permanent team is positive for the children she currently oversees who will not experience a change in IRO; this postholder will become permanent in April 2024.

One permanent IRO is currently on secondment to another service area within Family Services until December 2024; the role is covered by an agency IRO. There have been two changes in permanent staffing which has meant a change in IRO for approximately one third of looked after children.

Administrative support to the IRO Service is provided by the Conference and Review Manager with additional support from a dedicated Conference and Review Administrator.

Annual performance 2023/24

For the 357 children that were in care in the reporting period 2023/24; the data and performance indicators show:

- 95.4% of Looked After Children Reviews were held within statutory timescales
- 93.0% of children and young people participated in their Children in Care reviews.

The performance of reviews held within statutory timescales is an approximate 2.5% decrease from 2022/23 (97.9%). Of 974 reviews held, forty-five were held out of timescale, half of which were due to the availability of the social worker or carer and late notifications, the others were largely due to planning arrangements including placement changes or changes in Looked After status.

Participation is recorded as children who have attended their review meeting and spoken for themselves or contributed to the review by means of a consultation form, observation in the case of a very young child by the IRO, having their views presented by an advocate or interpreter, or a direct conversation with their social worker or IRO.

There was a 2.7% decrease in child participation (from 95.7%). The small number of children who do not wish to participate in their reviews are encouraged to do so and their views are captured separately if they feel unable to attend.

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/ Care plan is routinely updated and available for the IRO prior to each review for the large majority of children. Discussions between the IRO and the social work team take place before each review to ensure the information shared is up-to-date and the IRO is aware of any developments in the child's circumstances. Performance, audit data, tracking and quality assurance activity reflect the positive efforts being made by social work practitioners to ensure 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 the participation and contribution of young people in their care/pathway plans is evident.

- Where needed, IRO's provide challenge which is mostly positively received and responded to by social work teams. Challenge is respectful, relevant, clearly explained, consistent and is evidenced in discussions which are recorded on children's records, 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.

-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.

- Increased communication and consultation between the IRO's and social work teams in this reporting period is evident. There has been an increase in practice alerts which have largely been swiftly responded to by social workers and team managers, preventing the need for formal escalation. Eleven of sixteen formal escalations were in relation to care planning which is a shift away from compliance processes demonstrating child centred challenge.

- There has been a significant decrease in the need for unresolved formal escalations to be escalated to senior managers with just two in this reporting period compared to seven in 2022/23, demonstrating positive responses by managers to IRO escalations. The two escalations were relative to the timeliness of statutory visits to children in foster care.

-Sometimes care planning is contrary to the wishes and feelings of the child, in these incidences, there is evidence of the IRO advocating for children to ensure their views are well represented, i.e. a decision to delay the return of children to their mother's care until an Initial Child Protection Conference (ICPC) was held, the IRO challenged that the outcome of the ICPC would not have impacted the reunification plan and therefore should not delay their return.

-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.

-The IRO service is focused on preventing drift in care planning and delay in delivery of services. Examples of this can be evidenced and include challenge to placement arrangements that are not meeting children's needs for stability and permanency.

- The continued collaboration between the IRO service and the Corporate Parenting Service supports the timely updating of children's All About Me Care Plans; IRO's are invited permanency planning meetings, professional meetings, the Tackling Violence & Exploitation Panel and Child Exploitation and Missing planning meetings, allowing oversight and contribution to all aspects of the child's plan as needs or risks change.

-Changes in staff in both the IRO and Assessment, Intervention & Planning Service (AIP) has inevitably impacted upon relationships and support between the link IRO's to the AIP social workers. The Principal IRO and Assistant Heads of Service have taken steps to rebuild and strengthen the working relationships with IRO's linked to specific teams.

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.

-This reporting year has seen a slight decrease in children attending and/or participating in their reviews; this is largely due to a higher volume of children aged under four years and it not always being practical for them to participate in their reviews. For these children IRO's observe them in their homes and share review outcomes in letters to them which they can read later in their development to understand their care journey.

-IRO's are largely undertaking face-to-face reviews with just a small number of reviews taking place virtually when there has been a need to schedule an urgent initial review due to a late notification or to hold a two-part review (virtual and face-to face) to ensure the child's review is held within timescale.

- The IRO service has continued to develop and embed our child participation model by providing age-appropriate activities in the community events chosen by them. A Flip Out (trampolining) event followed by lunch was held in the 2023 Easter Break for children aged of 8-12 years. Ten children confirmed and six attended on the day. The children came together well as a group after an initial period of shyness and enjoyed making up their own running/chasing games and enjoyed the event and lunch. On reflection following the event, a decision was made to ensure future events have closer grouping of age ranges to ensure children are with others at similar levels of development and maturity.

-A Go-Karting event was held during October 2023 half term for children aged 13-16 years. The event was attended by six young people, a larger group was planned but some cancelled on the day. The age range worked well for this event and the children attending

really enjoyed the healthy competition between the young people and their respective IROs. Of course, the children won their races!

-Feedback from those attending was positive, they shared that they thoroughly enjoyed the event. One child requested a rematch with his IRO, his review was held the following day, and this has been included in his plan as a positive reward for improving his school attendance.

-One of the children attending was newly Looked After and event gave her the opportunity to meet other children in care and IRO's.

-One child was an unaccompanied minor who shared that he was so happy to be in attendance as it gave him something to do, he has been introduced to the Service Development Officer who will support him to engage in positive activities provided through BACE.

- The consultation booklet for children is not routinely completed for their reviews. The participation leads are working to improve ways to engage children in completion of feedback tools. Children's verbal feedback and views are being obtained outside of, and during reviews and the voice of the child is well recorded in the All About Me assessment, in their care plans and in Pathway Plans and appropriately responded to at every opportunity.

-The personalised record of review written to children in letter form has been in use since December 2020 and is well embedded as part of the reviewing process. The record of review letter is written in child friendly, age-appropriate language and personalised content continues to receive positive feedback from both children and partner agencies.

The review: a child centred practice

-The IRO Handbook states, 'for many older children and young people, particularly plan for independence that it is hoped the IRO will hand over at least part of the chairing role to them so that they can take an increased ownership of the meeting.' To achieve this level of participation a letter has been created by BOP children and young people to encourage other children to chair or take charge in their reviews.

-As part of the pre-meeting discussion or during the review the IRO's have been discussing and inviting young people to take part in chairing part or all their review meeting in whichever way they feel comfortable. Where a discussion has taken place, the outcome of is recorded in either the record of review, the child's detailed record or both.

- Not all young people want to chair their reviews, some are very clear that they do not want to do so, and others have stated that they are happy to revisit the idea at future reviews. There were a small number of young people who expressed interest to attend a confidence building workshop but have not been able or ready to take up the opportunity.

- Young people who have expressed an interest will be offered 1:1 discussions and opportunities with our participation leads (following either an event or a joint visit with social workers). It is hoped that this will be encourage and support young people to attend skills-based workshops.

-The letter designed by children has been emailed to each young person inviting them to discuss the idea with their IRO's. Where children do not have access to email, their carer's have been e-mailed asking them to share the information with the children in their care.

-To further promote the idea of young people chairing their reviews, social workers have been asked to introduce the idea to children aged 12+ during visits as they see the young people more often.

- *Ensure children understand how an advocate can help*

The IRO service, alongside the social workers continue to explain the advocate role and the role of the independent visitor to children and young people. The matter is routinely raised and recorded in the record of review more consistently by IROs. When an offer of an advocate has been declined, most IROs are now routinely revisiting the matter at subsequent reviews. Feedback from children and young people who have an advocate or independent visitor, is positive about their experience of advocacy.

The offer of an advocate to all Looked After children is a standing agenda item discussed at every IRO Service Team Meeting.

IRO Footprint

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

The IRO footprint and oversight of children's care planning is clearly evidenced on children's records. The Principal IRO regularly reviews children's records, particularly those where there has been alerts, uncertainty regarding a child or young person's Looked After status and/or a discussion with an IRO has taken place for any reason, to ensure the IRO's are appropriately recording their views and concerns on case files. Where the Principal IRO feels there is a need for IRO oversight/footprint to be more visible on a child's record, this is discussed with IRO.

Overall, IRO's provide appropriate challenge and escalate concerns where necessary, which contributes to robust and timely planning for children. Statutory reviews are taking place regularly and within timescale and Midway reviews are routinely scheduled; there is an increase in Midway reviews taking place and being recorded.

2023/24 Priorities

Child Participation Model

-A key priority for the year ahead is to continue to encourage and support children to participate in their reviews in ways that feel comfortable for them so they can be empowered in decision making about their care arrangements and hold professionals to account for their actions in the care planning process.

-to strengthen opportunities for participation and observation for 4–7-year-olds, using focused projects and encouraging more children to attend participation events.

- to support any service developments arising from the recent Bright Spots reports and participation in the summer celebration planning process.
- to work closely with the participation leads to create more accessible digital methods to collect child and parent feedback (QR codes and star ratings) with the aim of increasing feedback to improve reviews and services offered to children they are involved with.
- to continue to embed at and record at each review, the role, and benefits of having an advocate and/or independent visitor and where necessary encourage young people to take up the offer of an advocate.

IRO Practice Development

- There is a need to ensure that all IROs 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 progressing or meeting the child's needs.
- The IRO's are being supported to achieve these aims through both formal and informal supervision and group supervision. Safeguarding training provided for the workforce is attended by the permanent and agency IRO's to keep practice up to date.
- A key priority for the Principal Independent Reviewing Officer is to maintain workforce stability in the IRO service so that less children experience a change in IRO.
- continued oversight over the midway review process to ensure these are taking place routinely and recorded on children's files.
- to ensure IRO's routinely share when practice alerts are raised about the reviewing process, and where necessary escalated to the Principal IRO in accordance with the Safeguarding and Escalation Protocol to prevent drift in the reviewing process.
- to work with the Workforce Development Team to source 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 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, monitoring of statutory requirements i.e. timescales of decisions and minutes to prevent practice falling below expected standards.

IRO Workshops

Children in Care online process workshops are being advertised on the Learning POD and promoted in FS News to improve take-up. The workshops 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.

The next step is to review the workshop material and explore the possibility of turning it into an interactive software learning tool for the individual alongside delivering the workshops at student and NQSW inductions, team meetings and service days.

Conclusion

Communication and consultation between IRO's, social work teams and partner agencies continues to contribute to robust care planning and outcomes for children and young people. The IRO footprint is evident on most children's records: challenge and midway tracking has increased is clearly and well recorded.

Mostly, challenge to drive improvements in care planning for children is received constructively and there has been a significant decrease in practice alerts and formal escalations needing to be escalated to senior management. This is an improvement on the previous reporting year.

The key focus for the IRO's is to continue promote participation opportunities to develop their relationships with their children and young people and promote their confidence to chair their reviews and to continue provide high quality records of reviews and promote the role of the advocate to children and young people.

Practice development specific to the role of the IRO, training, child participation and using service user feedback to inform service development will continue to be the key priorities for 2024/25. Alongside, delivery of training using interactive software to provide insight into the role of IRO's and statutory expectations when a child becomes looked after.