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| 5 September 2018 | | ITEM: 6 |
| Corporate Parenting Committee | | |
| Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report | | |
| Wards and communities affected: All | Key Decision: Key | |
| Report of: Brian Relph, Interim Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance | | |
| Accountable Assistant Director: Sheila Murphy Assistant, Director Children and Families | | |
| Accountable Director: Rory Patterson, Corporate Director Children's Services | | |
| This report is Public | | |

Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to meet the statutory requirement for the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Manager to produce a report for the scrutiny of the Corporate Parenting Committee, established by the IRO Handbook (2010).

This report covers the period from 1 of April 2017 until the 31 of March 2018. Some of the data sets vary slightly from those published by children's social care due to minor variations in the timeframe for data capture.

1. Recommendation(s)

For the Corporate Parenting Committee to note the IRO Annual report 2017 - 2018 and the recommendations in the report.

2. Introduction and Background

The appointment of an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) for a child or young person in the care of the Local Authority is a legal requirement under s.118 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002

The IRO has a number of specific responsibilities, including:

- promoting the voice of the child
- ensuring that plans for looked after children are based on a detailed and informed assessment, are up to date, effective and provide a real and genuine response to each child's needs;
- making sure that the child understands how an advocate could help and his/her entitlement to one;

- offering a safeguard to prevent any 'drift' in care planning for children looked after and the delivery of services to them; and
- monitoring the activity of the local authority as a corporate parent in ensuring that care plans have given proper consideration and weight to the child's wishes and feelings and that, where appropriate, the child fully understands.

During the reporting period, the IRO service has remained very stable with no changes in personnel. The Service continues to comprise of five, permanent Independent Reviewing Officers.

IRO Case Loads

| | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 |
|-------------------|---------|--------|---------|--------|
| Average Case Load | 56 | 67 | 67 | 61 |
| Case Load Range | 58 - 62 | 62 -67 | 60 - 68 | 62- 65 |

During the performance year April 2017 – March 2018, the IRO service conducted a total of 707 reviews, which is a slight increase on the number of reviews conducted the previous year. The performance, in respect of reviews being held in timescale, fluctuated during the year, being as high as 96% in May of 2017 and as low as 73% in March of 2018.

Children participated in person or through an advocate or by another means in 71% of their reviews (excludes Children under 4 years of age). In 13% of reviews the child or young person did not attend or send their views.

Profile of Children and Young People in Care in Thurrock

Section 7 of the main report provides a detailed analysis of the characteristics of children moving through the care system in Thurrock.

Key points from this are:

- There has been a reduction of the number of children in care
- There has been a reduction in the number of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking children
- There are more boys looked after in Thurrock than girls
- The ethnic distribution of children looked after has not changed significantly in the past three years
- There has been a significant reduction in the use of Voluntary Accommodation (Section 20 CA1989), which is positive
- We have improved the stability of placements
- Most children looked after live within 20 miles of their home address
- We need to increase the number of children achieving permanency through adoption or special guardianship

One of the key functions of an IRO is to oversee the needs and rights of every young person in the care of the Local Authority.

The IRO Service recorded 67 completed dispute resolutions which is where the IRO challenged children services about an aspect of practice. These challenges were about the following issues.

| Number | Area of Practice Raised |
|--------|--|
| 11 | Pathway Plan for child leaving care not completed |
| 2 | Permanency Plan for the child was not robust enough and had to be changed |
| 24 | Report had not been prepared for the review meeting |
| 3 | An issue regarding the plan for the child's education had to be addressed |
| 3 | Child's Health Assessment needed to be completed to address a specific issue |
| 1 | An SGO application needed to be made for the child (case drifting) |
| 2 | Specific Assessment for the child had not been completed |
| 3 | There was a concern that the placement was not meeting the child's need |

The Children in Care Council was asked to provide feedback on the IRO service and made the following points

- Individual IROs were seen to be child centred and committed to their young people
- Young People said they trusted their IRO
- For some young people the IRO was the most consistent person – *“I’ve had her all the time I’ve been in care “*
- One young person felt their IRO was a good advocate – *they got things done!*
- Young people wanted more contact with their IRO
- Young people wanted to be able to talk to their IRO between reviews
- Some young people didn't see the point in going to reviews
- Some young people felt they got told off at reviews
- They act as independently as possible and are not afraid to challenge other professionals on behalf of their young people.
- IRO's don't follow up on recommendations and chase up Social Workers actions until the following LAC Review and often nothing has been done within the six months between the reviews. It would be good if they could do this between reviews.

In preparation of the IRO Annual Report an Audit was undertaken of LAC reviews (30 cases) by the Interim Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance.

Key issues from the Audit

Current IRO practice was variable although there were some good examples and some very good recording of children's views and wishes; this was not always consistently found.

Practice issues, which need to be addressed

- Review Minutes not written up in timescale - some IROs were completing their write ups on time and in some cases within 2 days of the review, others were not completing them until a few Week before the next review
- Child Participation was only recorded in detail in a minority of reviews
- Quality of recommendations - in some reviews there were clear child focussed recommendations. In a number however here were too much reliance on stock phrases, or simply statements such as - continue to monitor contact
- Challenge to care planning - some cases showed robust and well thought out challenge. However in a minority of cases where planning was weak and care plans lacked focus and direction there was insufficient challenge.

3. Issues Options and Analysis of Options

None

4. Reasons for Recommendation

- 4.1 To inform members of the work of the independent reviewing officer service during 2017-2018. The report also updates members with the recommended work plan for the IRO service during 2018 – 2019

5. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

N/A

6. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community

N/A

7. Implications

7.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **Michelle Hall**
Management Accountant

There are no financial implications associated with this report.

7.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Lindsey Marks**
Deputy Head of Legal Services Social Care and Education

Section 118 Adoption and Children Act 2002 introduced the concept Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs). Since 2004 all Local Authorities have been required to appoint IROs. The Children and Young Persons Act 2008 extends the IRO's responsibilities from monitoring the performance by the Local Authority of their functions in relation to child's review to monitoring the performance by the Local Authority of their functions in relation to a child's case as set out in sections 25A - 25C of the Children Act 1989. The intention is that IRO's should have an effective independent oversight of the child's case and ensure that the child's interests are protected throughout the care planning process. The IRO Handbook provides clear guidance on the IROs' role in and processes around the case review

7.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Roxanne Scanlon**
Community Engagement and Project Monitoring Officer

Although there is no direct Diversity or Equality Implications arising from this report, the overall improvement plan should have a positive impact on children and young people

7.4 Other implications (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder)

N/A

8. Background papers used in preparing the report (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

- N/A

9. Appendices to the report

Appendix 1 - IRO Annual Report 2017-2018

Report Author:

Brian Relph

Interim Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance

Children's Services