

10 September 2019		ITEM: 10
Corporate Parenting Committee		
Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report		
Wards and communities affected: All		Key Decision:
Report of: Ruth Murdock, Strategic Lead, Quality Assurance and Reviewing		
Accountable Assistant Director: Sheila Murphy, Assistant Director, Children's Services		
Accountable Director: Roger Harris, Corporate Director of Adults, Housing & Health / Interim 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 2018 until the 31 of March 2019

1. Recommendation(s)

1.1 For the Corporate Parenting Committee to note the IRO Annual report 2018 - 2019 and the recommendations in the report.

2. Introduction and Background

2.1 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.

2.2 During the reporting period, the IRO service has remained very stable with only one change in personnel. The Service continues to comprise of five, permanent Independent Reviewing Officers.

IRO Case Loads

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Average Case Load	56	67	67	61	62
Case Load Range	58-62	62-67	60-68	62-65	44-68

During the performance year April 2018 – March 2019, the IRO service conducted a total of 755 reviews, which is an increase on the number of reviews conducted the previous year. The performance improved in respect of reviews being held in timescale and was 93% which is up from 87% last year.

Children participated in person or through an advocate or by another means in 84% of their reviews which is an improvement on the 72% of their reviews last year (excludes Children under 4 years of age).

2.3 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 sustained reduction of the number of children in care over the past two years.
- There has been a continued 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, although the proportion of Black British children has remained higher than Black British children in the total population.
- There has been a significant reduction in the use of Voluntary Accommodation (Section 20 CA1989), which is positive
- We have significantly improved the stability of placements
- Most children looked after live within 20 miles of their home address
- We have increased the number of children achieving permanency through adoption

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 15 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
2	Local Authority Pathway Plan/Transition plan for child leaving care was challenged and had to be amended
8	Permanency Plan for the child was not robust enough and had to be changed
1	Challenge to Local Authority plan for Contact
2	An issue regarding the plan for the child's education had to be addressed
1	Specific Advocacy was requested for parents to participate in the review process

The IRO service complete a compliance checklist for every review conducted, averaging between 60 and 75 checklist per month; key issues identified by the checklist for 2018-2019 were:

- Social work reports were not always provided in a timely way to the review
- Children fully participate in 84% of their reviews
- The consultation booklets are poorly used
- In a number of Reviews looked after children have experienced a change of social worker since the last review
- There has been a problem with completing initial health assessments

This has lead the service to review the use and design of consultation booklets, challenge teams about the production of reports, and work with the CLA service and Designated Nurse to review the process for the commissioning of initial health assessments.

The service will also in 2019 carryout a survey of the reasons behind the changes of social worker between reviews.

The Participation Worker was asked to engage young people and provide feedback on the IRO service and made the following points.

What Children and young people value about their IROs:-

- Honesty
- Trust
- Communication
- Confidence
- Hearing the YP's views
- Empathy

- Understanding
- Good listener
- Experience
- Patience
- Independent
- Equal power with looked after children
- Self-awareness
- Appropriate language (no jargon)
- Compassion

2.4 Young people's suggestions as to what we can do to improve the service:

- Hold a short pre-meeting to ensure that the plan is shared, everyone has information, actions and can come to the Children's Looked After review prepared to ensure progression of the plan.
- Give children the choice of who is invited, what is discussed, where it is held.
- Recognise where Children and Young People may need time out or where they might be uncomfortable discussing certain things in the meeting.
- Sometimes views are not taken seriously enough.
- IRO'S should be able to challenge local authorities that are not always making best decision for the child.
- More encouragement to attend reviews.
- Maybe in a different environment than a foster carer's house, child gets choice as to where they are.
- Maybe more conversation with the young person on how the meeting is to run and who it will involve, if they would feel comfortable with certain people their etc. Some young people may prefer smaller meetings with fewer people. It may encourage them to engage more.

2.5 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.

IRO practice over the last year is less variable there were more examples of good recording of children's views and wishes; however, this was not always consistently found in the cases audited.

Practice issues, which need to be addressed:-

- The majority review minutes are now written up in timescale, however in a quarter of cases audited (30) these are on case notes as the social worker had not completed the pre-meeting report.
- Child participation – although in most cases the child's views were presented to the review, older children were choosing not to attend the meetings and this is an area for development.

- Quality of recommendations - in some reviews there were clear child focussed recommendations. In a small number however there 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 from the IRO.
- Care Plans since the introduction of the new format have significantly improved, plans are more focussed. More could still be done to individualise the plans and bring out the individual child needs.

3. Issues Options and Analysis of Options

These are included in the attached Annual Report.

4. Reasons for Recommendation

- 4.1 To inform members of the work of the independent reviewing officer service during 2018-2019. The report also updates members with the recommended work plan for the IRO service during 2019 – 2020

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

- 5.1 Not applicable

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

- 6.1 Not applicable

7. Implications

7.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **David May**
Strategic Lead Finance

There are no financial implications associated with this report.

7.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Lindsey Marks**
Deputy Head of Legal 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: **Natalie Warren**
Strategic Lead Community Development and Equalities

The Service is committed to practice which promotes inclusion and diversity, and will carry out its duties in accordance with the Equality Act 2010 and related Codes of Practice and Anti-discriminatory policy. Placements and Staff members represent diverse backgrounds and heritage and are able to promote equality and diversity.

7.4 Other implications (where significant) – there are no implications as a result of this report

- Not applicable

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):

- Not applicable

9. Appendices to the report – there are one appendix for this report

- Appendix 1 - IRO Annual Report 2018-2019

Report Author:

Ruth Murdock
Strategic Lead, Quality Assurance and Reviewing
Children's Services