

4 January 2022		ITEM: 8
Corporate Parenting Committee		
Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: N/A	
Report of: Trevor Willis Service Manager, Safeguarding, Reviewing & Child Protection Ruth Murdock, Strategic Lead of Quality Assurance and Reviewing		
Accountable Assistant Director: Janet Simon, Assistant Director, Children's Social Care and Early Help		
Accountable Director: Sheila Murphy, Corporate Director of Children's Services		
This report is public		

Executive Summary

The purpose of this document 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.

This document should be read in conjunction with the *"Thurrock Children's Services, Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report"* for 2020 – 2021 (see Appendix 1)

1. Recommendation(s)

1.1 For the Corporate Parenting Committee to review and comment on the IRO Annual report 2020 - 2021 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 Children Looked After are based on a detailed and informed assessment, are up to date, effective and provide a real and genuineresponse 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 Thurrock IRO Service has remained stable; there have been no changes of personnel. The Service comprise of five permanent Independent Reviewing Officers.

The average caseload for IROs is 60 – with a variance between 58 and 61.

During the performance year April 2020 – March 2021, the IRO Service conducted a total of 864 reviews. This is a decrease of 76 reviews (8%) when compared to the number of reviews conducted the previous year. The performance, in respect of reviews being held within timescale, improved during the year, with the final average being 98.4% of reviews held within timescales; an increase of 0.9% when compared to last year.

This year, children and young people participated in person, or through an advocate, or by another means by providing their views in the majority of reviews. Only 2% of reviews were conducted (for children over the age of 4) where they did not attend nor send their views. Children and young people are encouraged to feed back their views by the 'Mind of My Own' App alongside speaking with their carers, allocated social workers and IRO.

For the period April 2020 to March 2021, 97.6% of review reports were completed within timescale by the IRO's.

2.3 Profile of Children and Young People in Care in Thurrock

Section 9 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:

- The monthly breakdown for the numbers of children looked after has remained relatively stable and consistent throughout the year ranging from 306 to 291. The rate of Looked After Children per 10,000 for March 2021 represents 67 children per 10,000, this is in line with national data and slightly above statistical neighbours. (65 per 10,000)
- The number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children has risen slightly by 4 (representing 8% of the total cohort) as of March 2021, this is still lower than previous figures between 2014 and 2019

- The number of children adopted has fallen by just over 2.2% from the previous year; nationally figures have fallen by 4%
- There are more boys Looked After in Thurrock than girls (62% and 38% respectively)
- Black British children are not over represented in the looked after population at 14.1% (2020 figures) which compares to the school census data of 14.4%, although children from mixed/dual heritage backgrounds are 10.1% compared to the school census data of 6.3%
- The majority of children looked after are subject to legal proceedings at 75% which compares to national data (77%) and shows a desire to achieve permanence and stability for children
- The number of children placed more than 20 miles away from their home has fallen slightly by 0.4%. with 70% of Children Looked After living within 20 miles of their home address, although the complex needs of some children results in it not being possible to find local placements. The majority of children not placed in Thurrock are placed in neighbouring boroughs of Essex, Greater London or Kent

2.4 Feedback from Children and Young People about their care plans

At a recent involvement event a number of young people were asked about their views surrounding their care plans. 95% of children were optimistic about their care plans believing that they would either help or “sort of” help them. 65% of children were either involved or “sort of” involved in the development of their plans.

Only 58% of children knew or “sort of” knew what was in their plan and it is the focus of the IRO service to ensure that moving forward reviews clearly indicate to children and young people what their care plan is and how they can be involved in the development of this plan.

IROs are developing more creative and interactive ways of involving children and young people, including how reviews are recorded in a more accessible and personal format.

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 2020-2021. The report also updates members with their recommended work plan for the IRO service during 2021 – 2022.

5 Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

Not Applicable

6 Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community

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: Judith Knight
Interim 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. The IRO Handbook is statutory guidance and includes the requirement that an annual report is produced for the Corporate Parenting Panel covering the matters set out in paragraph 7.11 of that document.

7.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: Roxane Scanlon
Community Engagement and Project Monitoring Officer

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. Members of the service represent diverse backgrounds and heritage and are able to promote equality and diversity.

7.4 Other implications (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health Inequalities, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder, and Impact on Looked After Children

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**

- Appendix 1 - IRO Annual Report 1 April 2020 – 31 March 2021

Report Author:

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