

Corporate Parenting Panel

14 December 2018

Independent Reviewing Officer: Looked After Children & Child Protection Annual Reports 2017/18



Report of Jac Tyler, Operations Manager, Children and Young People's Services, Durham County Council

Electoral division(s) affected:

None

Purpose of the Report

- 1 The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Service's Looked After Children Annual Report for the period 1 April 2017 to 31 March 2018, in accordance with requirements within the IRO Handbook (2010) and Working Together.
- 2 This report should be read alongside the Looked After Children Annual Report which is attached as Appendix 2.

Recommendation(s)

- 3 The Corporate Parenting Panel is recommended to:
 - (a) Note the contents of the report;

Background

- 4 In Durham, Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) have a dual function of chairing looked after reviews as well as child protection conferences. The role of an IRO in relation to Looked After Reviews is laid down in statute, but is not for child protection.
- 5 The law states that all children and young people that become looked after must be appointed an IRO. The IRO Handbook (2010) tells IROs what they should be doing for children and young people who are in care. An IRO has an important role in making sure that children and young people's care plans meet their needs. *IROs are there to make sure that reviews are run properly; that children and young people's views are listened to and their best interests are protected (Young People's Guide to the IRO Handbook).*

- 6 The primary function of a child protection chair is to ensure that the statutory functions required within child protection conferences are delivered in a robust way, in line with Durham's Local Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB) Child Protection Procedures.
- 7 Detailed monthly and quarterly IRO reports are produced which are reported to Children's Social Care throughout the year. Two annual reports are produced each year; one for Looked After Children and one for Child Protection, outlining the work undertaken in the year and areas for further development in coming year.
- 8 The reports are structured as follows:
 - (b) What do IROs do?
 - (c) How are we doing?
 - (d) What do we need to do next?
 - (e) The Child's Journey (Appendix)

Key Messages within the Annual Reports

- 9 There have been significant challenges and developments during this year, including the restructure of Children's Services and increases in both the number of Looked After Children (1,195) and the number of children subject to Child Protection plans (785) throughout the year. The IRO service has needed to respond to this increased demand.
- 10 Increasing demand has resulted in increases in the number of disputes raised this year. When an IRO has a worry about a child or feels that the plan is not progressing as it should be, they have a responsibility to raise this with Children's Services managers. This is done through the Dispute Resolution Process (DRP). The social worker will work with the IRO to try to resolve any differences they may have in relation to a child's or young person's plan. How disputes were resolved and key themes are highlighted in the reports.
- 11 It is evident that IRO's do routinely raise disputes where they have concerns around children's plans; however, it is difficult to evidence whether these disputes are having an impact in improving outcomes for children and young people. There is a need for disputes to become outcome focused rather than a process.
- 12 Participation of Looked After Children remains a strength within the IRO Service and this is embedded into practice. IROs have continued to encourage children and young people to engage and participate in care

planning process and reviews. IROs work hard to support and encourage children, parents and families to contribute fully and appropriately. It is recognised that participation of young people within the child protection process requires improvements. This is a key priority for 2018/19.

- 13 IROs attend the Children in Care Council meetings which provides an opportunity to share information and listen to the priorities of children looked after. New approaches are also being developed for the engagement of children and young people, where it is envisaged that children and young people will be able to compile their own agendas and share views in preparation for their reviews.
- 14 The IRO Service work closely with Children and Young Peoples Service's (CYPS) and feedback key messages regarding challenges and positive factors in relation to social work practice and progression of the children plans. A key strength for the IRO service is the commitment of CYPS operational and strategic management level to seek timely resolution and promote positive challenge at every opportunity. This can be evidenced through the day to day culture of positive communication and resolution to disputes raised through the Dispute Resolution Process (DRP) at an early stage.
- 15 The IRO service is committed to working with partners and developing the service. This can be seen in training courses and development sessions facilitated by the IROs for Children's Services teams and LSCB partners around the role of the IRO. Work at a regional level has also taken place with CAFCASS and NYAS. Each IRO has a lead for a development area within the service.

IRO Service Priorities 2018/19

- 16 Durham's self-evaluation describes the quality and impact of social work practice in Durham and sets out our priorities over the next twelve months. In line with the 14 key recommendations the IRO Service have set out five key areas for development in 2018/19. Each key area of development is listed below and further detail on the IRO Service's 2018/19 action plan is available on request.
- 17 Looked After Children
 - a) Increase the number of Looked After Children who are actively involved in their review.
 - b) Ongoing professional development of IROs and the IRO Service.

- c) Continue to undertake robust quality assurance and oversight of practice and care planning to ensure stability requirements are met and good outcomes achieved for children and young people.
- d) Promote the IRO Service and contribute to wider service development and improvement activity.
- e) Implementation of Signs of Safety.

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Appendix 1: Implications

Legal Implications

The Service consult with legal service colleagues as appropriate in the course of their work

Finance

Rearranged and cancelled meetings are costly to the Local Authority.

Consultation

None.

Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty

E&D issues are fully considered in the course of the IRO Service work.

Human Rights

Compatible with Human Rights Act.

Crime and Disorder

Police colleagues play a full and vital role in the provision of information and decision making in the work of the team.

Staffing

None.

Accommodation

None.

Risk

Failure to implement the procedures consistently and effectively can lead to higher risk to children and young people.

Procurement

None.