

## Corporate Parenting Panel

31 January 2020

**Independent Reviewing Officer: Looked After Children & Child Protection Annual Reports 2018/19**



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### **Report of Sharon Davey, Operations Manager, Children and Young People's Services, Durham County Council**

#### **Electoral division(s) affected:**

Countywide

#### **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 2018 to 31 March 2019, 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.

#### **Executive Summary**

- 3 There has been an increase of demand on the service with the number of Children who are Looked After increase by 3%. The IRO service has continued to work in partnership with Children's Services, CAFCASS and multi-agency partners to provide a quality of service. The service continues to implement a strength based approach within the child protection conferencing to include children and their families.

#### **Recommendation(s)**

- 4 Members of the Corporate Parenting Panel are recommended to:
  - (a) Note the contents of the report

## **Background**

- 5 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. The role of the Conference Chair is carried out by the IRO.
- 6 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).
- 7 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 Safeguarding Children's Partnership (DSCP) Child Protection Procedures.
- 8 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.

## **Key Messages within the Annual Reports**

- 9 There has been an 3% increase in the number of children looked after (CLA), from 809 as at 31 March 2018 to 833 as at March 2019. This has however continued to increase in 2019/20 and has been consistently above 850, reaching almost 900 more recently, which would equate to an 11% increase. Looking at the longer-term trend in CLA, this has increased by around 50% over the last five years, when it was around 600. With regard to the number of children on a child protection plan, this decreased by 19% from 496 as at 31 March 2018 to 403 as at March 2019. This is similar to pre-2017 levels and is currently slightly lower. The IRO service has needed to respond to this increased demand and continue to provide a robust and supportive service.
- 10 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. There has been a difficulty in recording any informal DRPs aside with the introduction of the new recording system, Liquid Logic. The number of DRPs Stage 1 has not been captured. This has since been resolved and will be reported on in the future.

- 11 It is evident that IROs do raise disputes where they have concerns around children's plans. A new additional level of oversight has been added of a monitoring meeting once a DRP is raised, to ensure that changes are made timely for children.
- 12 Participation of Looked After Children remains a strength within the IRO Service. IROs have continued to encourage children and young people to engage and participate in care planning process and reviews. It is recognised that participation of young people within the child protection process requires improvements. This is a key priority for 2019/20.
- 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. The CICC have devised an IRO Profile which will be sent out before each meeting with detail of how to contact their IRO and some additional information to help build on a working relationship between the IRO and the young person. The IRO Team Development Day included a workshop with the Investors In Children (IIC) and the Children In Care Council (CICC) feedback themes and areas of development. This has in turn been the building blocks for the service plan for 2019/20.
- 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. The IRO service is now part of the monthly performance meeting reporting and will support in any new challenges for the future.
- 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 DSCP partners around the role of the IRO and adapting a safety approach to child protection conferencing. This training is now delivered by the IRO service. Work at a regional level has also taken place with other Local Authority IRO services, CAFCASS and NYAS. Each IRO has a lead for a development area within the service and will attend development forums such as Early Help forums, Signs of Safety Leads, Domestic abuse and collaborative audits.

## **IRO Service Priorities 2019/20**

- 16 The IRO Service action plan sets out what needs to be done during 2019/20 and these include:

For children and young people involved in the child protection system:

- a) Increase the numbers of children and young people who want to attend their child protection meeting.
- b) Continue to ensure that plans for children and young people are robust and progress without delay. Make sure plans are written in a way that families and children can understand with a focus on impact on children and young people.
- c) IROs will continue to work alongside social workers and other professionals to promote better outcomes for children and young people at risk of harm.
- d) Continue to embed the strength based approach when running meetings, to allow children and their families to fully participate.

And for Children and Young People in Care:

- a) Increase the numbers of Looked After Children who are actively involved in their review.
- b) Continue to ensure that plans for children and young people are robust and that they progress without delay.
- c) IROs will continue to work alongside social workers and other professionals to promote better outcomes for children and young people.
- d) Ensure that all looked after children understand their plan and are part of the process when making these plans.

## **Conclusion**

- 17 There has been an increase of demand on the service with the number of Children who are Looked After increase by 3%. The IRO service has continued to work in partnership with Children's Services, CAFCASS and multi-agency partners to provide a quality of service. The participation of children within Looked After meetings is strong. The service continues to embed a strength-based approach to include children in the child in the child protection conference process.

**Background papers**

- None

**Other useful documents**

- Looked After Children Annual Report

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## **Appendix 1: Implications**

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### **Legal Implications**

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

### **Finance**

There are no Direct Financial implications in this report.

### **Consultation**

None.

### **Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty**

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

### **Climate Change**

None.

### **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.