

**Independent Reviewing Officer
Looked After Children Annual Report
2016/17**

**Report of Jac Tyler, Operations Manager, Children & Young
People's Services**

Purpose of the report

- 1 The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Service, Looked After Children and Child Protection annual reports for the period 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2017, in accordance with requirements within the IRO Handbook (2010) and Working Together. The report will also report on key quality themes that the IRO service has identified over the course of the previous 12 months.
- 2 This report should be read alongside the Looked After Children annual report which is attached as Appendix 2.

Background

- 3 In December 2013, feedback was received from the Corporate Parenting Panel (CPP) and the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) to create 2 separate annual reports focusing on Looked After Children (LAC) and Child Protection. Up to this date, the reports were combined into a single report.
- 4 These reports draw on the work of the IRO Service individually for both the areas of Looked After Children and Child Protection, identifying the achievements from 2016/17 and areas for further development for 2017/18. It also provides an overview of key quality themes for consideration and further discussion.

The Role and Function of the IRO

- 5 In Durham, Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) have a dual function of chairing looked after reviews as well child protection conferences. The role of an IRO in relation to Looked After Reviews is laid down in statute, but not for child protection.
- 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 LSCB (Local Safeguarding Children's Board) Child Protection Procedures.
- 8 Working Together to Safeguard Children 2015 provides guidelines in relation to safeguarding children and states the responsibilities of the chair of the child protection conference:
 - They are accountable to the Director of Children's Services. Where possible, the same person should chair subsequent child protection reviews;
 - They should be a professional, independent of operational and/or line management responsibilities for the case;
 - They should meet the child and parents in advance to ensure they understand the purpose and the process.
- 9 IROs also make sure that they tell the Local Authority when they are not doing enough for children and young people as their corporate parent. IROs will challenge the Local Authority if they disagree with the Local Authorities plan for a child or young person. IROs will also tell the Local Authority about things that are going particularly well.

Key Messages within the Annual Reports

- 10 There have been significant challenges and developments during this year which included a number of staff changes, a significant increase in the number of Looked After Children and an increase in the number of children subject to Child Protection plans. The IRO service has needed to respond to this increased demand.
- 11 It was recognised that IRO caseloads were high due to the increase in cases and if not addressed would impact upon the capacity to fulfil their responsibilities in line with statutory requirements. It is positive that the proposal for an additional IRO has been agreed. Caseloads will continue to be monitored by the IRO Manager.
- 12 The most important part of an IRO's role is to ensure quality is monitored and achieved for children and young people who are Looked After or subject to Child Protection plans.
- 13 The IRO Service work closely with Children and Young Peoples Services (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 engender positive challenge at every opportunity. This can be evidenced through the day to day culture of positive communication, resolution to disputes raised through the Dispute Resolution Process (DRP) at an early stage. A review of performance information has been undertaken in consultation with Children's Services Strategic Managers and Head of Service.

- 14 A number of actions have been put in place to improve performance. These include the tightening up of escalation procedures including strategic manager approval sign off, regular meetings between the IRO Service and CYPS and a positive, proactive approach to challenge and resolution by Operations and Strategic Managers.
- 15 Areas for improvement highlighted by the IRO Service have been in relation to:
- poor quality assessments and plans;
 - delays in progressing plans;
 - meetings going out of timescale.
- 16 CYPS Strategic Managers are asked to consider these on a monthly basis and provide responses as to reasons why and remedial action to be taken to improve. These areas are now being addressed by service managers as priorities.
- 17 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 2017/18.
- 18 Placement stability remains positive for permanently looked after children in Durham. The IRO service have continued to scrutinise the plans of children where there are delays in achieving permanent plans. This includes children and young people who are subject to voluntary accommodation under S20 for extended periods and plans not ratified at second review.
- 19 The IRO Service continues to strive for improvements in the quality of the service. The service continues to provide quantitative data such as attendance and participation of children and young people, parents and professionals. 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.
- 20 Improvements to evidence the impact of the IRO can be difficult to collate. Efforts have been made to streamline recordings which will capture data. The IRO Service has continued to make significant steps in implementing improvements and outcomes for children and young people.
- 21 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 2017/18

- 22 There are 4 key areas identified for development in relation to Looked After for 2017/18. Details of how these are to be achieved are detailed in the body of the report:

Looked After Children:

- a) Increase the numbers 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.

Recommendations

- 23 The Corporate Parenting Panel is recommended to:

- (a) Note the contents of the report;
- (b) Note the development of processes to identify, escalate and address practice concerns for looked after children and children with a child protection plan;
- (c) Note the analysis of practice and the identification of areas for improvement required of Children and Young People's Services.

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Appendix 1 – Implications

Finance - Rearranged and cancelled meetings are costly to the Local Authority.

Staffing - None

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

Equality and diversity - E&D issues are fully considered in the course of the IRO Service work.

Public Sector Equality Duty - The work of the service takes into account equality and diversity and ensures accessibility. The profile of complainants in relation to equality and diversity is consistent with the equality and diversity profile of County Durham.

Accommodation - None

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.

Human rights - Compatible with Human Rights Act.

Consultation - None

Procurement - None

Disability issues - Disability issues are taken into full consideration within the work of the service.

Legal implications -The Service consult with legal services colleagues as appropriate in the course of their work.