

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

18TH NOVEMBER 2020

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES

Purpose of report

1. The purpose of the report is to present the Annual Report of the Independent Reviewing Officer with regard to children in care and those subject to child protection planning. The report evaluates the extent to which Leicestershire County Council has fulfilled its responsibilities to these children for the period 1 April 2019 – 31 March 2020; including its corporate parenting function.

Policy Framework and Previous Decisions

2. The IRO (Independent Reviewing Officer) has a statutory role to ensure effective and improved care planning for children and young people, securing better outcomes, with their wishes and feelings being central and given full and due consideration. (IRO Handbook March 2010).
3. This Annual Report is a requirement of 'The IRO Handbook - Statutory guidance for Independent Reviewing Officers and Local Authorities on their functions in relation to case management and review of looked after children' (March 2010). The content and format follows the prescription set out in the guidance. The report complies with the expectation that it will be available for scrutiny by the Corporate Parenting Board, as well as accessible as a public document and most importantly, communicated to Leicestershire's children in care in a child and young person friendly version.
4. In relation to children subject to child protection planning, Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018 is the governing statutory guidance for this period of reporting.

Background

5. The appointment of an IRO is a legal requirement under S118 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002, their role being to protect children's interests throughout the care planning process, ensure their voice is heard and challenge the local authority where needed in order to achieve best outcomes.

6. The IRO Service in Leicestershire is hosted within the Safeguarding and Performance Service, part of Children's Social Care (CSC), which sits within the Children and Family Services (CFS) department. Whilst part of CSC, it remains independent of the line management of resources for children in care and the operational social work teams with managerial accountability sitting with the Head of Service Safeguarding and Improvement.
7. The role of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) is essential to the quality assurance and effectiveness of the looked after experience of children and young people, not just on an individual basis but collectively, with IROs having a key part to play in monitoring the performance of the Local Authority as a Corporate Parent; drawing out themes for improvement and development, providing challenge to help drive forward change and improvement both in respect of individual plans but more thematically in respect of the improvement plan. In Leicestershire, IROs take the same quality assurance approach in respect of both children subject to child protection plans and care plans for children in care.
8. The effectiveness of the role has rightly been subject to scrutiny since its inception and the legal framework and statutory guidance was revised in 2010 to support a strengthened position. This is set out in the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 (amended 2015) and the IRO Handbook 2010.
9. The report is an opportunity to pinpoint areas of good practice and those in need of further development and improvement, providing information that can contribute to the strategic and continuous improvement plans of the local authority. It highlights emerging themes and trends, and details areas of work which the service has prioritised during the year.

Key Areas of Success

10. Average performance for the year in relation to timeliness of Looked After Children (LAC) Review of Arrangements remains high at 98.4%, as is the case for timeliness of Review Child Protection Conferences (93%) and Initial Child Protection Conferences (95.2%). All of these key performance indicators compare well with statistical neighbours and national data. This ensures that plans for children are reviewed regularly minimising drift and delay for children. Service Managers have oversight of any cases that are going to be out of timescale to ensure robust decision making and learning is shared and recorded.
11. There have been specific improvements in processes associated with the administration of the IRO service for children in care and significant improvements in reducing a backlog of records being processed by IROs which in turn has improved the timeliness of distribution and sharing the record of the meeting within the required 20 working days. IROs are now consistently providing the agreed actions of the Looked After Child (LAC) review within five days of the review so that the development of the care plan can proceed without drift and delay. Regular audit activity is undertaken within the unit to monitor this and a performance report is being developed during quarter 4 (2019/20).

12. The percentage of children participating in their reviews has increased from 86.6% (1,049) last year to 92.3% (1214) this year. It is positive to see that there has also been an increase in both the number of children and young people attending their reviews as well as communicating their views in other ways. The engagement of children in their reviews is critical to them understanding their care plan and the decisions and actions around this.
13. There has been a decrease in the number of child protection plans open over 18 months. This is important as extended plans can evidence drift and delay and lack of impact for the child in bringing safety. A six-monthly audit undertaken by the Safeguarding Manager highlights the main contributing factors to being reduced:
 - Consistency of allocated workers, i.e. social worker and Child Protection Conference chairs have not changed over this reporting period.
 - There is evidence of management oversight by Team managers and Service Managers on some cases which have helped to direct the case to avoid drift.

A robust quality assurance framework and programme of audit work is applied within the Safeguarding and Performance Service driven by the Safeguarding Managers and individually by IROs. The IRO plays a critical role in identifying themes and areas of both specific case related and wider areas for improvement across service areas. Their independence and oversight of planning for both children subject to Child Protection and care plans provides a focus on achieving best outcomes for children and families and opportunities for challenge. The impact of this work is that the unit knows itself well – responding quickly when data highlights emerging trends to understand areas for development. It also means that challenge can be brought to address case work issues with the use of a process of Quality assurance alerts.

Key Areas for development

14. There has been a gradual increase from October 2019 in the number of repeat child protection plans, resulting in the final year to date performance of 21.6%. This is now RAG rated red against the target of 19%. Leicestershire is still lower than its statistical neighbours (22.2%) but higher when comparing with 'Outstanding Shire's' who average at 19.4%.
15. The IROs complete an analysis tool for all incoming repeat plans to enable learning and this is supported by regular quality assurance activity and sharing this across services to develop a holistic response to this declining key performance measure. This understanding of themes and patterns is being used to inform a service wide action plan which includes IROs and locality teams to ensure effective intervention and planning minimises the need for further child protection plans.
16. The IRO service has oversight and is central to supporting and driving improvement against the recommendations from the Ofsted inspection 2019, which highlighted development areas including consistency of recording, drift and delay in permanence and SMART planning. Considering the issues raised, although there has been specific improvement in increasing the use of QA

Alerts, the impact of this is not yet fully embedded and use of the alerts is not consistent across the IRO group. Work during 20/21 will provide pace to moving the QA alerts into Mosaic to formalise within case workflow and to create a tableau performance report so that case level detail can be used thematically to measure impact and underpin consistent challenge.

17. There has been a reduction in the timeliness of Review Assessments by the social worker being received 24 hours before a LAC Review 76% (2018-19) to 68.3% (2019-20). This needs consistent challenge from IROs using the Quality Assurance Alert escalation process to highlight themes and responses from teams. The importance of sharing the report in a timely manner is a key message to front line staff and ensures that the meeting is well informed and constructive.

Resource Implications

18. None.

Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure

19. None.

Equalities and Human Rights Implications

20. These are addressed throughout the report as the aim is to improve standards and outcomes for all children and young people in care, including disabled children, young children and those from minority and harder to reach groups. The IRO Service has a diverse compliment of staff with good representation across gender, age, sexual orientation as well as ethnicity.

List of Appendices

Appendix 1 – Annual Report of the Independent Reviewing Officer 2019/20

Appendix 2 – Safeguarding and Improvement Learning Audit Framework

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