

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

8 NOVEMBER 2022

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES

Purpose of report

1. The purpose of this report is to present the Annual Report of the Independent Reviewing Officer with regard to children in care. The report evaluates the extent to which Leicestershire County Council has fulfilled its responsibilities to these children for the period 1 April 2021 – 31 March 2022, 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. A plan on a page is being designed for children to identify what has worked well within the provision of IRO services to children, areas of improvement and proposed developments but this is not yet complete.

Background

4. 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.
5. 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.

6. 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.
7. 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.
8. 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 themes within this report

Response to COVID-19

9. The Coronavirus pandemic, which started in March 2020, presented significant challenges across society with specific increased risk to children particularly during periods of absence from school. During this reporting year April 2021-March 2022 restrictions did begin to lift and work to adapt ways of working to return to a face-to-face model for the review processes was started. However new strains of the virus delayed the launch of the department's 'future ways of working model' until late into March 2022. For much of this reporting period, therefore, Review meetings remained mostly virtual. From March 2022 the expectation has been that all meetings should now be convened face to face unless the child or young person share that they want their meeting to be held virtually or there are exceptional circumstances such as the key person attending testing positive for Covid-19, in which case a hybrid model can be applied.
10. The Safeguarding and Performance Service worked flexibly during the year to make meetings as effective as possible, ensuring visits to children in preparation for meetings, even when meetings were delivered virtually, so that relationships were built and maintained as the basis of the IRO relationship with children.
11. Young people continued to state that for some, virtual meetings are preferred. For others, their response has been that face to face meetings strengthen their feeling of being heard.
12. Staff have continued to adapt to the new ways of working and felt supported to work differently, with access to home and remote working models. Staff have

continued to make good use of technology to manage day-to-day communications with a major achievement being the shift to using Microsoft Teams for key planning and decision-making meetings rather than Skype. This approach has also enabled staff to remain in close contact with their immediate colleagues to prevent social isolation and to log onto training and team meetings.

13. All workers have continued to show inventive ways of engaging children, such as using WhatsApp and video calls. The Corporate Parenting Team has been creative in ensuring children and young people's participation with many groups and activities taking place virtually, including the continuation of the Children in Care Council, Choir, Corporate Parenting Board as well as other fun activities, quizzes, and craft events. As some opportunities for face to face contact emerged during the year these were carefully planned and managed to reduce any risk of infection.
14. Quality assurance and learning improvement activity has continued during the year 2021/22, with all planned activity being delivered to ensure senior management oversight of the quality of service being delivered. Audit activity has included writing to the child, IRO oversight and tracking, looked after children health assessments and a Placement Order audit. This is in addition to the thematic audits completed by all CFS areas. This work became more focused from May 2021 when the service split into two separate and dedicated teams to allow children in care to have dedicated IRO oversight separate to that from children subject to Children Protection Plans. This re-alignment of the service provided significant benefit to service development and quality assurance based on clear lines of responsibility and oversight to plans for children in care.

Timeliness

15. Performance in relation to timeliness of Review of Arrangements meetings has been consistently above 90% over recent years. Whilst this continued over the past twelve months, it did reduce slightly from 98.96% to 96.2%.
16. At the year ending 31 March 2022, the IRO Service had completed 1875 Review of Arrangement meetings for looked after children, more than the previous 12 months (1524). Of these, 1804 were within timescales, which equates to 98.96%. This is actually more than the previous year when 1508 meetings were in timescale (though as a percentage this was higher). Analysis of details suggest that some data errors may impact on this performance including when a review meeting is held in two parts. Work to ensure that data entry is a focus on improvement has started – timeliness is a key part of the quality measure.
17. A significant improvement during 2021/22 has been the focus on formal midway tracking of plans. There has been more consistency in this process this year to ensure that the IRO role, their views and oversight of progress is recorded using a template mid-way between meetings. This has had a significant impact on identifying any plan that is at risk of drift and delay before the review period is complete.
18. There has been a continued focus on timeliness of uploads of the outcome of the Review meeting to comply with the expected timescales

Effective Care Planning

19. Statutory guidance for care planning states that there should be a permanence plan for all looked after children at the time of the second review of arrangements. In 2021/22, from the cohort of children (239), 33% had a permanence plan at the second review. This is an increase from the previous year when this was 27% but remains less than 2019/20 when this was 35%. Unfortunately, there are many reasons why permanence cannot be agreed at the second review, which may include further assessments needing to be carried out to identify if it is safe for a child to return to live with the parent or carer with whom they lived before coming into care and if this is not possible consideration of other options. The number of children where a decision for permanency is made at future review meetings continues to increase – 44 children at third review, 20 children at fourth review and eight at fifth review.
20. Permanence plans were evidenced in 68% of children as of 31 March 2022 – this does however include a cohort of children for whom a permanency decision is not yet required, based on having only recently become looked after. This is similar to previous year's performance, although due to changes in reporting an exact comparison is not possible. Work to improve how the decision for permanence is captured continues to be part of the improvement planning.

Participation

21. The child and young person's voice, their views and wishes are essential to the care planning. IRO's continue to strive towards obtaining this and ensuring children and young people actively participate in the review process. However, due to the COVID19 restrictions during 2021/22 this is in no doubt a significant area that has been affected by the lockdown measures and the fact that most looked after reviews during this year have continued to take place virtually.
22. In every year it is acknowledged that not all children will want to attend their meeting and it will be necessary to support their participation in other ways. There had been a consistent pattern of children increasingly attending their ROA's up to the start of 2020/21. Although it is perfectly acceptable for children to participate in their reviews in any way they choose, IRO's always value seeing children and young people face to face and getting to know them and understanding the issues that are most important to them.
23. In 2021/22 there has been a slight upward trend with an additional 29 occasions when a child or young person attended their review, although this remains below the pre pandemic period.
24. PN1 - Children who attend their reviews and speak for themselves, shows that 590 children attended during 2021/22 compared to 561 in the previous year. Of concern, analysis of PN7 - Children who did not attend or convey their views in any other way, increased up to 147 compared to 118 in 2020/21. Whilst there is not statistical evidence, anecdotal feedback from the IROs suggests that this is largely the age group 5-11 who seem most affected by the virtual format. It has been found that many older children have been more comfortable to engage virtually, with some actually preferring this type of meeting. It is hoped that in 2022/23 improvements will be seen in participation more generally due to options, including meetings in school settings becoming possible, now that face to face meetings are back in place.

25. Another important development in the approach to participation has been the use of the 'My Review' leaflet. This document was designed by the Children in Care Council to help children and young people prepare for their review meeting or to be submitted to the IRO as a written record of their views. This is now available as an online document to make its use in the process easier. It is also available from the corporate parenting website:
26. <https://www.leicestershire.gov.uk/education-and-children/social-care-and-supporting-families/services-for-looked-after-children-and-young-people/corporate-parenting>

Impact of Quality Assurance

27. The quality assurance role of IROs is critical to the development and improvement of the intervention that is provided to children and families and the impact that the service has on the outcomes achieved. IROs have key duties that scrutinise and support the quality, safety and effectiveness of safeguarding practice and policy, care planning and permanence. IROs are central to identifying and sharing good practice and checking the quality and consistency of provision across Looked After Children.
28. IROs have a statutory role to quality assure the care planning and review process for each child in care and to ensure that his/her current wishes and feelings are captured clearly, central to planning and given full consideration. The Children and Young Persons Act 2008 extended the IROs responsibilities from monitoring the performance of their function by the local authority in relation to a child's review to monitoring the performance by the local authority of their functions in relation to a child's case. Through these changes the IRO has an effective, independent and holistic oversight of the child's case and ensures that the child's interests are protected throughout the care planning process.
29. This oversight provides opportunity for independent challenge in decisions identified as not being in the best interests of the child or where drift or delay has an impact on outcomes. An effective IRO service will drive forward improved outcomes for children and young people and will ensure that his/her current wishes and feelings are given full consideration.
30. Significant work has been completed with the IRO service to develop a rigorous Quality Assurance process which identifies areas of concern as well as areas of good practice. The service continues to use Tableau reporting, which enables robust data analysis to identify themes across service areas where targeted work can be completed to address these.
31. From 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022 there were 575 Quality Assurance alerts completed for children in care. Of these there were 138 for good practice and 437 highlighting areas for improvement. This volume is significantly increased from 2021/22 when there were 130 alerts completed. This increase is a significant improvement demonstrating the role of the IRO being consolidated in practice. A strong management information system is now in place to ensure that the alerts are followed up and this allows practice to be enhanced. Work is also taking place with the dedicated IRO team to agree bottom lines for standards to bring consistency into the process and to ensure professional discretion is embedded. The availability of real time data significantly enhances

the IRO role to provide assurance to operational managers and allows the service to consider emerging themes for any improvement work. Updates are provided to SMT regularly to ensure these themes are picked up for any broader learning activity.

32. This QA process sits within a tiered framework to allow escalation to the most senior management level if concerns are not addressed within an agreed timescale. This year, only four issues have been considered as outstanding by the Assistant Director and no issues have been taken to the highest level to be addressed by the Director. Additionally, the need for external challenge to CAF/CASS, which forms part of the process, has not been used this year.

Corporate Parenting Service

33. As Covid-19 pandemic restrictions were rolled back there has been a return to face to face participation events for the Children in Care Council, Corporate parenting groups and most young people seen in person by their Children's Rights Officers and Participation Officers since early 2022.
34. The Corporate Parenting team is based within the Safeguarding and performance service. During 2021 the team underwent a restructure with the introduction of a Senior Children's Rights Officer who oversees the day-to-day management of the team and line manages the workers. The team now consists of one FTE Senior Welfare Rights officer, three FTE Children's Rights Officers, and 1.6 FTE Participations Officer. The team provides support to both children in care and to children subject to child protection planning. From 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022 there were 88 referrals for children in care and children who have left care, five of which were redirected to other professionals for specific support.
35. Young people are generally supported by the team in response to both engagement in specific activities but also for advocacy and support services. Examples of reason for referrals to the service include support to attend meetings, assistance with complaints, exploring rights and entitlements, court support and for young people in secure accommodation. For older young people who have left care this can include addressing housing issues, asylum support and transition advice.
36. During this year there have been some specific themes for support:
- Council tax issues – some inequality in current policy which disadvantages young people placed outside of the county who do not benefit from the council tax waiver that is currently in place,
 - Homelessness and a lack of suitable accommodation is a concern and support to young people who do not have accommodation allocated is a key area of support and work is currently ongoing to update the housing policy with district council colleagues,
 - Savings for children in care can cause confusion and inconsistency based on their placement history. Young people are telling us that more consistency in approach is important so that young people have a foundation for them at age 18,
 - Assisting young people who identify a difficult relationship with their social worker.

37. The average age of young people presenting for support is 16 years – this may represent the significance of transitions that are made and planning for independence for some young people at this age.
38. The service supported 83 children using a range of interventions from face-to-face meetings, visits, and telephone calls, advocating with other professionals and agencies on their behalf. This included 72 meetings either to support the young person directly (77%) or representing them (22%)
39. Some of the services engage directly with young people to provide opportunities for support and peer interaction. 'Out in Care' group supports LGBTQ+ young people to socialise and learning something new. In February 2022 the group took part in the My books My story project – producing pieces of artwork based on their favourite book.
40. The Children in Care Council has continued to meet during the year though mainly virtually; positively this does not appear to have impacted on attendance and engagement. The current age range of the 15 regular members is 12 -17 years. The annual report includes a video message from one of the current members.
41. Highlights of the year included the successful launch of the Young Peoples corporate parenting video. This aims to raise awareness of the local authority's corporate parenting responsibilities.
42. The Children in Care Council members have also participated in a number of meetings – with managers to launch the Review of contact arrangements – and also taken part in recruitment. The Creative Voices Project involved monthly workshops delivered in partnership with Pedestrian, a voluntary Sector Community Arts project. External funding was secured for this project from the KFC Foundation.
43. Beacon Voice's Looked After Children's choir has continued to meet throughout the last year, albeit mostly virtually. A key event for the choir was preparation for the annual celebration event in May this year. The impact of participation in the choir has been significant to build confidence and prevent isolation for young people.
44. An amended Summer Scheme was held for 20 children aged between 7 and 11 at Beaumanor Hall providing outdoor activities – this was all managed to respond to any risk of Covid-19 transmission. Feedback noted the positive impact for all children attending.
45. The Children in Care are collective Green Champions welcoming the opportunity to focus their discussion on both the green agenda and environmental issues. This has led to a partnership with the Leicestershire and Rutland Wildlife Trust, with opportunities for involvement in local projects. This will be a focus for the group going forwards.

Service Development

46. The implementation of the focused teams in May 2021 is the most significant service development this year. The dedicated capacity has provided a real impetus for development of the IRO role in improvement planning. Numbers of children in care this year has remained relatively stable which has further enhanced the ability to build consistency into the processes.
47. To build on this and to improve participation the service has aimed to move to the first review being held face to face – this commenced early in 2022 and applying a consistent approach to both Face to Face, hybrid and virtual meetings will be key to 2022/23 planning.
48. Another area of progress this year is ensuring that children’s health needs, including dental treatment, are met in a timely way. Following the impact of Covid-19 and its ongoing pressure on health services, it has been acknowledged that the service needs to do better at ensuring all children have their regular health assessments. The service also needs to implement a consistent and systematic approach to using the learning from the strengths and difficulties questionnaire which aims to highlight the emotional wellbeing of the children in care. The Corporate Parenting Board is overseeing regular performance reports and is being used to hold both the Local Authority and Health colleagues to account.
49. Work has commenced to remove some of the administration out of the Review processes and better use of technology is being explored. The aim is to maximise the time that our IROs spend on quality assurance activity and directly engaging with children. Any steps to support this by increasing the use of modern recording options are being explored including using audio recording. The intention is to have a plan for this during 2022/23.
50. For the Children in Care Council the aim is for them to continue to have meaningful influence on service development going forwards. More work regionally is planned to build the sphere of influence and to share ideas for good practice.

Resource Implications

51. None.

Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure

52. None.

Equalities and Human Rights Implications

53. 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.
54. The Safeguarding and Performance Service have an Equality and Diversity Action Plan in place which ensures that all staff are enabled to feel safe and supported within the Safeguarding and Performance Service, in addition to

working towards a stronger, evidence-based approach to tackling inequalities - including relevant research, data, Quality Assurance activity and engagement with children, young people and families.

List of Appendices

Appendix A – Annual Report of the Independent Reviewing Officer 2021/22

Appendix B – Annual Report of the Corporate Parenting Board 2021/22

Appendix C - Corporate Parenting Team Annual Report Headlines

Officer(s) to Contact

Jane Moore

Director of Children and Family Services,

Tel: 0116 305 2649

Email: Jane.Moore@leics.gov.uk

Sharon Cooke

Assistant Director, Targeted Early Help and Children's Social Care

Tel: 0116 305 479

Email: Sharon.Cooke@leics.gov.uk

Hayley Binley

Service Manager, Safeguarding and Performance Service

Tel: 01163057566

Email: hayley.binley@leics.gov.uk

This page is intentionally left blank