



**CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE –
7 NOVEMBER 2023**

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 2022 – 31 March 2023.

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 follow's the prescription set out in the guidance.
4. The report complies with the expectation that it will be available for scrutiny by the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny committee, 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 which is being finalised.

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. There are a wide range of implications/impact assessments that should be considered as part of the decision-making process. These are as follows and any

positive or negative impact on these areas should be addressed in this section of the report: 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.
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.

Proposals

Headlines 22/23 period overview.

10. The nature of the IRO role means that they have continued to work flexibly and from home throughout this period of review. This period is the first that can be considered post Covid and whilst generally the social work workforce has seen a shift to working more from an office base the nature of the IRO role has meant a move to a more home-based working pattern for the staff. The report does however identify the key pieces of work during the 2022/23 period focused on the quality of meetings and flexibly ways these are coordinated – increasingly shifting to face to face arrangements with children and their voice remaining a key focus.
11. The service has faced some new challenges with the shift of recording into a newer version of the recording system Mosaic from December 2022. The impact of this on day-to-day practice and staff should not be underestimated with extensive training and re-working of key processes and changes to recording templates that have required wholesale change for the workforce. In addition, this change to record has also meant significant gaps in reporting of performance in some areas although, as the roll out of the new system continued these reports have come back online. The service has however needed to adapt and manage information creatively to ensure it can maintain oversight of key processes including tracking work manually.
12. There has also been a change in management of the service. The Service Manager has taken a period of Maternity leave from December 2022 and an interim manager has been in post from that date. The careful handover meant that the work to drive

improvement has continued – this included a period of introduction and shadowing. The previous assistant Safeguarding Manager with responsibility for the IRO service left the service in February 2023 and recruiting to this post took longer than expected. This has caused some delay in actions being fully implemented in the 2022/23 period though these will be fully implemented over the 2023/2024 review period. An assistant Service manager was successfully appointed on a four-month secondment from an IRO post within the team in May 2023 and continues to drive the team forward to consolidate performance.

13. Key areas of development this year have focused on delivering the aspirations set out in the Departmental Road to Excellence Plan (21-23) which is at Appendix B. This alongside “Our Promise” to children in care provides the aspiration, vision, values and behaviours which embody the IRO service. The service has seen particularly emphasis on understanding the trauma that children in care are likely to have suffered both in their experiences before becoming looked after but also in their experiences in care when they are separated from their family networks. IROs have all accessed the necessary training to underpin trauma informed approaches to supporting children and in particular to inform how they coordinated and manage meetings and support the participation of children and their families.
14. Quality assurance and learning improvement activity continues to indicate how the service is performing and forms a key part of understanding the lived experience of children in care, the quality of social work services they have in place, arrangements for their day-to-day care, time with their families and achieving permanency. The service has continued to conduct regular audit of its own service but also to provide a key role as a crucial friend to operation colleagues by the implementation of the informal and formal QA process. There has been a focus on having a strong IRO footprint in records to capture how the IRO is actively supporting high quality services – the quality and timeliness of plans and ensuring that there is a focus on driving for best outcomes including where appropriate to achieve permanency.

What is the impact for children.

Well managed meetings

15. Over this review period, the IRO’s have been undertaking far more face to face reviews and getting out to see children. Whilst face to face reviews have started to be the norm again over this review period, there is a greater emphasis on the young person choosing how they would like their review meeting to take place.

Permanence

16. The focus on permanence and timing planning means that children experience less drift and delay in achieving outcomes – whether this is to return to their family network to achieve permanency in care or by adoption. The IRO Service places a high level of importance on children having permanence plans and will always raise concerns in relation to drift and delay in this area.

Celebrating success

17. The service continues to celebrate successes of children. This may be small individual messages of congratulations by individual IROs or more whole service wide gestures. In September 2022, a Celebration of Achievement Awards was held

which celebrated Children in Care and their successes, the first event of its kind post Covid19. This event was held over two evenings at the Leicester Space Centre and was well attended.

IRO Challenge and Escalation

18. Child friendly Quality Assurance Alerts have been further enhanced in this review period and is now embedded in practice which will mean that service to children are good or outstanding. The Safeguarding Service has continued to work hard to embed Quality Assurance Alerts into practise and become part of Leicestershire's culture of continuous improvement. It has long been recognised that it is important that when an alert for concern is raised that these are written in a clear and objective manner that highlights any work that needs to be done whilst acknowledging positives and difficulties in achieving the right outcomes.
19. The year 2022/23 has been a period of transition and consolidation for the service. This has impacted on some of the pace of delivering some of its ambitions however an overview of the year gives the service confidence that it is in a strong position to further enhance services into 2023/24.

Consultation

20. The plan moving forward is to consult with young people moving forward who are key stakeholders within the service.

Timetable for Decisions

21. Over the next 12 months, the service will aim to continue to embed the areas of specialism and expertise within the IRO Looked After Children (LAC) Focus Team, ensuring a high-quality service is delivered to children and young people. Increasingly, the service is focused on the impact of trauma as key to understanding children's needs.
22. A service which is focused on ensuring their needs are met, represented and addressed within their Care Planning, along with promoting their individual sense of identity, belonging thus ensuring an inclusive service is provided. The IRO's advocate for and challenge where necessary to ensure the Local Authority is meeting its statutory responsibilities, but in addition staff are being proud Corporate Parents for the care being afforded to children, in line with Corporate Parenting Strategy 2022 – 2025.
23. A major development for the IRO Service is to pilot the recording of Review of Arrangement's (ROA's), this started to be considered over 2022/2023. However, due to reservations of its compatibility with existing IT services provided, the development was paused. The service hopes that this can be considered again over this review period to consider whether it would have the intended benefits noted previously in the Annual Report 2022/2023.

Conclusions

24. Key stakeholders for consultation include children in care through formal mechanisms in the Children in care counsel but also through the Corporate Parenting

Board, where this report will be shared with young people and professional stakeholders such as Health, Education, Housing and the Police.

Background Papers

25. Corporate Parenting Strategy 2022 – 2025
https://www.proceduresonline.com/llr/childcare/leicestershire/user_controlled_lcms_a_rea/uploaded_files/Corporate%20Parenting%20Strategy%202022-2025compressed.pdf
26. The Children and Social Work Act 2017
<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2017/16/contents/enacted>
27. Statutory guidance on the roles and responsibilities of the Director of Children's Services and the Lead Member for Children's Services
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/271429/directors_of_child_services_-_stat_guidance.pdf
28. Children Act 1989: care planning placement and case review
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/441643/Children_Act_Guidance_2015.pdf
29. Children Act 1989: planning transition to adulthood for care leavers
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/397649/CA1989_Transitions_guidance.pdf

Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure

30. None

Equalities Implications

31. 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.
32. 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.

Human Rights Implications

33. There are no Human Right's Implications arising from this report.

Appendices

Appendix A – Annual Report of the Independent Reviewing Officer 2022/23
Appendix B - Departmental Road to Excellence Plan (21-23)

Appendix C – Independent Reviewing Officer Looked After Children Focus Team Annual Report

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 7441
Email: sharon.cooke@leics.gov.uk

Kay Fletcher,
Head of Service Safeguarding, Improvement and Quality Assurance
Tel: 0116(30)55138
Email: kay.fletcher@leics.gov.uk

Paul Dowd,
Service Manager, Safeguarding, Improvement and Quality Assurance
Tel: 0116 305 7566
Email: paul.dowd@leics.gov.uk