



CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE:
3 SEPTEMBER 2024

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER
2023/24

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES

Purpose of report

1. The purpose of this report is to present the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee with 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 2023 – 31 March 2024.

Policy Framework and Previous Decisions

2. The Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) 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 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 summarised over one page.

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. 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 2023/2024.

Proposals

Headlines 23/24 period overview

10. This year has been a year to reset and regroup, introducing Independent Reviewing Officer bottom lines and a more personalised and purposeful Independent Reviewing Officer service. The Independent Reviewing Officer bottom lines put children at the centre of their review meetings and set out the required standards to be met, focusing on the consistency and quality of reports and care plans. The Independent Reviewing Officers continue to write their records to the child in a way that is kind, reflective and focused on the young person. All Independent Reviewing Officer's now have a one-page profile with their picture, contact details, their hobbies, and interests and why they are in the Independent Reviewing Officer role. This is provided to children they are working with to support developing their working relationship and was an initiative introduced this year.
11. During the year, the service management structure was reviewed. After a formal consultation process the Safeguarding and Performance service has been consolidated with Practice Excellence Service managed by a single Service Manager. Whilst this brings opportunities for strengthening and closer cooperation in a single service, it also meant that for a period of time from January to April 2024, a service manager post was vacant, when temporary arrangements for cover ended. The Assistant service manager and Head of Service worked hard to bring continuity to the Service during this period and prevented any delay in delivering its ambitions. The new combined Safeguarding and Practice Development Service including Safeguarding and performance, Practice Excellence Team, Quality Assurance and Improvement Team, and Corporate Parenting was launched in June 2024.

12. Importantly, there has been a robust recruitment drive with the recruitment of 3 full time permanent Independent Reviewing Officer's starting in January 2023, and a further two full time permanent Independent Reviewing Officers recruited to start in June 2024. All staff within the Service are now permanent members of staff.
13. Over this year, the Service has been working with the Corporate Parenting Team to develop the Language that Cares Toolkit which has been developed in partnership with the Children in Care Council. This aims to ensure children feel comfortable with the language being used, rather than language being projected onto them. This will be launched early into the next annual reporting year 2024/2025 and the Independent Reviewing Officers are seen as playing a pivotal role in this being implemented and embedded.
14. The finalisation of changes to recording in the Mosaic system was completed in May 2023, so that all children in care records moved to the new version. This significantly changed how reports and care plans are completed for our children, also creating more ways to capture Independent Reviewing Officer activity tracking the child's plan through the review period and opportunities to record positive challenge or feedback. This required extensive training and re-working of key processes and led to some gaps in reporting as systems changed. Most gaps in reporting have now been resolved. There has been positive feedback from the impact of this system change.
15. Quality assurance and learning improvement activity continues to show how the Service is performing and forms a key part of understanding the lived experience of children in care, and the quality of social work services they have in place. The Service has continued to conduct regular internal audits which also provide a key role as a critical friend to operation colleagues by the implementation of the informal and formal quality assurance process. Key to this is having a strong Independent Reviewing Officer footprint in our records so that the role in achieving best outcomes for children, including where appropriate to achieve permanency, is visible.

Consultation

16. During the year, consultation has taken place with a number of key stakeholders. The Children in Care council, which is made up of a number of children and young people who are in care, has been a key place for consultation on a number of topics including development of bottom lines and the development of feedback forms.
17. The Service seeks feedback from young people who the Independent Reviewing Officers are working with, alongside parents, family, foster carers, and then other wider professionals who attend Review of Arrangements Meetings. The Corporate parenting board provided further strategic steer for service development for our Looked After Children service and the IRO service is well represented in that forum.

Resource Implications

18. There are no resource implications arising from this report.

Timetable for Decisions

19. This report sets out our ambition for the next 12 months. The Independent Reviewing Officers are committed to driving forward the use of the Language that Cares toolkit which has been developed by the children in care council. The importance of language will play a key part in review meetings, supported by this toolkit, to ensure that the views and choices of children and young people around language are heard, respected, and followed. The Independent Reviewing Officer, through the review meeting process is pivotal to the implementation of this and ensuring the language children prefer to use is championed across the service and visible in care planning records.
20. The Service is now within a new structure and over the next 12 months this structure will give increased connection to other teams. This includes practice excellence team, corporate parenting team and quality assurance and improvement team. The collaboration across these teams will mean closer working around practice and improvement, enabling the Independent Reviewing officers to be even more integral in helping to support and develop practice across the service, provide quality assurance, and support driving improvements. This will help to link quality assurance activity to learning and practice improvements.
21. Officers will continue to focus on the participation of children and young people taking part in their review meetings, and consistently sharing their views to inform their care planning. For Independent Reviewing Officer's to keep in touch with children between their ROA meetings and to ensure they have a positive working relationship with the child that best meets their situation and needs.
22. Over the next 12 months, the Service will ensure that there is focus on family, friend, and professional networks for young people within their review meetings and within Independent Reviewing Officer oversight between reviews. This will support an exploration of a child and young person's identity and culture and help support future transitions into independence. Independent Reviewing Officers will also ensure that diversity, equality, and inclusion is considered for children in care, and that children have the support that they need to thrive, with appropriate challenge being brought if required.
23. Independent Reviewing Officers will continue to support and advocate for children's needs within care planning. For those children currently in pre-proceedings or care proceedings as part of the public care outline, Independent Reviewing Officers will focus on challenging any drift or delay and championing good practice to support decisions made for children. This will be achieved through proactive use of quality assurance processes. There will also be a pilot of CAFCASS being involved at the pre-proceedings stage, and so this will hopefully support relationships between Independent Reviewing Officers and CAFCASS further, for the benefit of children and young people.

Conclusions

24. This report sets out a summary of the work of the Independent Reviewing Service and the keys areas of focus for the past year. Bringing this together has enabled us to reflect on the key achievements and successes of the service, alongside recognising areas of further development. Those areas have fed into plans for the next 12 months to continue to drive an effective service for the children and young people of Leicestershire who are in care.

Background papers

The Children and Social Work Act 2017:

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2017/16/contents/enacted>

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

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

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

None

Equalities Implications

25. 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.
26. 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

27. There are no human rights implications arising from this report.

Other Relevant Impact Assessments

28. None

Appendices

- Appendix A – Annual Report of the Independent Reviewing Officer 2023/24
Appendix B – Child friendly version

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