



CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE:
1 SEPTEMBER 2026

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 Officers for 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 2025 – 31 March 2026.

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 in the care of the Local Authority, securing better outcomes, placing their wishes and feelings at the centre of the plan and giving full and due consideration as set out in the IRO Handbook 2010.
3. The Annual Report is a requirement of The IRO Handbook which provides statutory guidance for Independent Reviewing Officers and Local Authorities, setting out the function of the role in relation to case management and review of looked after children. The content and format of the report follow's the expectations of the guidance.
4. The report is available for the scrutiny of the Overview and Scrutiny committee and is accessible as a public document. Most importantly, it is communicated to Leicestershire's children in care in a child and young person friendly version .
5. The role of the IRO is supported by the Corporate Parenting Strategy. The Strategy sets out how the County Council and its partners work together to help Children in Care and Care Leavers feel safe, valued, supported and empowered to achieve the best possible outcomes in life.

Background

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

7. There are a wide range of implications and impact assessments that should be considered as part of the decision-making process in the planning 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 operational line management for children in care which sits in the operational social work teams. Management accountability sits with the Head of Service, Safeguarding and Improvement.
8. 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. This is 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. This aims to drive forward change and improvement both in respect of children's individual plans but more thematically in respect of service development.
9. 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.
10. The report details key performance data for the reporting year. It is an opportunity to pinpoint areas of good practice and areas for further development and improvement. It provides information that contributes 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 2025/2026. It sets out areas for further work in the years 2026/2027.

Headlines

11. During 2025/26, the number of children in care increased to 761, compared with 694 at the end of the previous year.
12. The Independent Reviewing Officer Service completed 2,203 Review of Arrangements meetings for individual children, equating to 1,783 meetings when sibling groups are counted together.
13. Despite this increased demand, timeliness remained strong, with 98.4% of reviews completed within expected statutory timescales.
14. Children's participation remained a clear strength, with 93% of children aged over four supported to contribute to their review. Permanence planning is also strengthened, with 96% of children having an agreed permanence plan and all children who had reached their second review, where assessments had concluded, having a permanence plan identified.

Key achievements

15. Key achievements during the year included maintaining timely and purposeful reviews during a period of increased demand, further embedding child-centred and

trauma-informed approaches to review meetings, and strengthening the use of challenge and escalation to reduce drift and delay in care planning.

16. The Service completed 431 Quality Assurance Alerts, including 144 formal escalations, 199 challenges and 88 recognitions of outstanding practice. This reflects a more mature quality assurance culture, with stronger oversight of care plans and greater recognition of effective practice.
17. The Service has also continued to contribute to wider improvement activity, including continuing to embed the Language that Cares Toolkit, continued use of the Coming Into Care Pack, engagement with CAFCASS, the Family Justice Board, regional IRO forums, the Corporate Parenting Board and the Youth Voice Council.

Forward plans

18. Over the next 12 months, the Service will focus on sustaining timely, high-quality reviews in response to demand; continuing to strengthen children's participation, including wider use of the My Review booklet; and continuing to challenge drift and delay so ensuring timely permanence planning for children.
19. Further priorities include improving the use of feedback and quality assurance data to demonstrate impact, maintaining oversight of health and dental needs, promoting family networks, identity and belonging, supporting work on reunification and preparing for relevant developments linked to the Families First Partnership Programme enduring relationships.

Consultation

20. During the year, consultation has taken place with a number of key stakeholders. The Youth Voice Council, which is made up of a number of children and young people who are in care, has been a group to offer responses and engage in consultation on a number of topics.
21. The Service seeks feedback from young people who Independent Reviewing Officers are working with, alongside parents, family, foster carers, and then other wider professionals who attend Review of Arrangements Meetings.
22. The Corporate Parenting Board provided further strategic steer for service development for Looked After Children service and the IRO service is well represented in that forum.

Resource Implications

23. There are no resource implications.

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

Corporate Parenting Strategy, 2026 -2029:

<https://democracy.leics.gov.uk/documents/s196414/Appendix%20A%20-%20Corporate%20Parenting%20Strategy.pdf>

Independent Reviewing Officers Handbook:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-reviewing-officers-handbook>

Our Promise:

<https://trixcms.trixonline.co.uk/api/assets/llrcs-leicestershire/f9c9e0bc-28c9-484f-bc0b-84926b5c0925/69.-children-in-care-promise-a5-portrait-02.pdf>

Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure

25. None required.

Equalities Implications

26. 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.
27. The role of the IRO is supported by the Corporate Parenting Strategy which upholds local authority responsibilities in terms of the nine protected characteristics and there is no negative impact (age, sex, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief and sexual orientation). The strategy recognised that children in care and care leavers have varied identifies and those should be supported and recognised within corporate parenting responsibilities.
28. Leicestershire County Council has agreed that being Care Experienced will be treated as a protected characteristic. This is alongside a number of neighbouring Local Authorities.

Human Rights Implications

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

Other Relevant Impact Assessments

30. None

Appendices

Appendix A – Annual Report of the Independent Reviewing Officer 2025/26

Appendix B – Annual Report of the Independent Reviewing Officer 2025/26
(Child friendly version)

Appendix C – Corporate Parenting Strategy

Officer(s) to Contact

Sharon Cooke
Interim Director – Children and Family Services
0116 305 5479
sharon.cooke@leics.gov.uk

Kay Fletcher
Interim Assistant Director – Targeted Early Help and Children's Social Care
0116 305 5138
kay.fletcher@leics.gov.uk

Hollie Martin
Interim Head of Service – Safeguarding, Performance and Quality Assurance
0116 305 3718
hollie.martin@leics.gov.uk

Emma Bulgin, Service Manager, - Safeguarding and Practice Development
Tel: 0116 3050367
Email. Emma.bulgin@leics.gov.uk

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