

Title of report: Independent Reviewing Officers Annual Report

Meeting: Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee

Meeting date: 23 November 2021

**Report by: Interim Assistant Director Quality Assurance
Safeguarding and Partnerships**

Classification

Open

Decision type

This is not an executive decision

Wards affected

(All wards)

Purpose

To provide the Committee with an overview of the work of Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) service in relation to Looked After Children

Recommendation(s)

That the Committee review the information provided and determine any recommendations it wishes to make.

Alternative options

1. There are no alternative options. Under the provisions outlined in The Children and Young Persons Act 2008, it is a statutory requirement for the IRO Service for Looked After Children to produce an annual report.

Key considerations

2. The Independent Reviewing Officers' (IRO) service regulations are set within the framework of the updated IRO Handbook and linked to revised Care Planning Regulations and Guidance. The responsibility of the IRO has changed from purely the management of the review process to a wider overview of the case, including regular monitoring and follow-up between reviews. The IRO has a key role in relation to the improvement in the quality of care planning for children Looked After and for challenging drift and delay.

3. The Local Authority must provide for the children who are in its care; an allocated Independent Reviewing Officer within five days of them becoming Looked After, a first Child Looked After Review within twenty eight days and a second review within twelve weeks of the first review. Following this each child must have a review chaired by their Independent Reviewing Officer no less than every six months and the IRO should have oversight of the effective implementation of the child's care plan in between these reviews. This presents the IRO service with an independent view of not only each child but the performance of the local authority in its provision of care for Children Looked After.
4. During 2020/21 the monthly average of Children Looked After in Herefordshire was around 335. While the details of the Child Protection Conference Chair aspect of the service will be addressed in a separate report, it is important to note that during 2020/21, IROs were until the end of February 2021 holding combined IRO and CP Chair caseloads. These caseloads had reduced on average by 5 from the previous year due to the reduction in Children Looked After and children subject to Child Protection Plans. It is likely that this contributed to the improvement in performance for timeliness across performance measures and the increase in quantity of IRO oversights.
5. Core activities of the IROs include; preparing for and chairing Child Looked After Reviews, undertaking and recording oversight of cases between reviews with social workers and their team managers, reviewing case files, visits to children in placement, additional consultations with children, parents, carers and other agencies, quality assurance of assessments and plans which contribute to changes in care planning for the child, liaison with CAFCASS Guardians in court proceedings and clarification of legal advice, as well as the escalation of informal and formal disputes to address drift and challenge where there is disagreement in promoting the child's best interests. Covid-19 impacted on the capacity of IROs to undertake physical visits to children in placements, with guidance being that physical visits, as not for safeguarding purposes, were not to be undertaken. However, IROs continued to meet virtually with looked after children to get their wishes and feelings.

Community impact

6. The functioning of the Independent Reviewing Service is a direct response to the number of children becoming Looked after within Herefordshire and is provided across all areas of the authority.

Environmental Impact

7. The service continues to function using technology where this is the most appropriate to meet the needs of children.

Equality duty

8. Under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, the 'general duty' on public authorities is set out as follows:

A public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to –

- a) eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
- b) advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;

- c) foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

The IRO report supports the Council in its overall duty to promote equality. The work of the IRO helps to improve the quality of care planning for Children Looked After to ensure their individual needs are met.

Resource implications

- 9. There are no specific resource implications arising from the report.

Legal implications

- 10. There are no specific legal implications arising from this report.

Risk management

- 11. There are no specific risk implications arising from this recommendation

Consultees

- 12. This is the annual report of the service outlining activity undertaken during the year 2020/ 2021

Appendices

- 13. Appendix A: Annual Report – Independent Reviewing Officer

Background papers

- 14. None identified