

Title of report: Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) Annual Report 2021/2022

Meeting: Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee

Meeting date: Tuesday 14 February 2023

Report by: Dylan Harrison, Head of Safeguarding and Quality Assurance

Classification

Open

Decision type

This is not an executive decision

Wards affected

(All Wards);

Purpose

The purpose of this report is to present the committee with the annual Independent Reviewing Officer report (2020/21).

Recommendation(s)

That:

- a) the contents of this report are noted by the scrutiny committee, and**
- b) The committee offer any further constructive challenge, define any further action or recommendations to inform and support the Independent Reviewing Officers**

Alternative options

1. Scrutiny Committee could choose not to review information contained in this report; this is not recommended as the council needs to ensure that it carries out its functions as set out in the Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) Handbook and the Care Planning Regulations and Guidance.

Key considerations

2. The council must provide and allocate an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) to each child in care. The responsibility of the IRO is to chair “children looked after reviews”, regular monitoring the progression of the case and follow-up between reviews. The IRO has a key role in relation to the improvement in the quality of care planning for children in our care.
3. The roles and responsibilities of the IRO are set out in the updated [IRO Handbook](#) which links to the [Care Planning, Placement and Case Review \(England\) Regulations](#). This includes identifying good practice and escalate where the council is not fulfilling its duties to children in care.
4. The IRO service produces an annual report. The annual report is attached and covers the period April 2021 to March 2022 and was authored by the (then) Head of Service for Safeguarding, Professionals Standards and Principal Social Worker. The report was written prior to the most recent [Ofsted inspection](#) which took place in July 2022.
5. The importance of having a strong, independent and effective IRO service is vital within Herefordshire given the need to drive to improve the quality of social work practice and the experience of children and families receiving the Council’s children’s services.
6. To a degree the report is transactional and the impact of the Independent Reviewing Officers is not always overt in the report attached (Appendix 1). This is acknowledged by the current Head of Service for this area and work has been taking place more recently to better evidence the impact of IROs, through the introduction of a revised escalation process and tracker, and this will be incorporated into the next IRO Annual report (2022/23).
7. During 2021/22, 972 children looked after reviews were held and chaired by IROs. These reviews consist of the child (if s/he wants to attend), the IRO, the social worker, the foster carer or placement and other professionals involved with the child. During the review the IRO will consider how the care plan for the child meets the needs and whether the placement continues to be appropriate.
8. In addition to the children looked after reviews, IROs recorded 3,531 IRO oversights to ensure that the care plan for the child is progressing appropriately. This was a significant increase compared with the year prior. Dip-sampling revealed that these oversights were focussed although the approaches by individual IROs were not consistent and were not always effective at arresting drift.
9. An IRO oversight template has since been introduced to improve consistency and ensure that there is a more uniform approach to IRO oversights.
10. The report makes reference to the increase in the number of children who became looked after during 2021/22. This combined with a less stable workforce of social workers and managers during the year has resulted in a smaller proportion of first children looked after reviews being held within timescales (78% versus 95% during 2020/21).
11. During the current year we have seen interim social workers being increasingly loyal to Herefordshire and staying for longer which has stabilised the workforce. This will be further aided by the current recruitment campaign to attract permanent staff (including social workers and IROs).
12. In response to service demand, an additional IRO was recruited to on an interim basis and this ensured the independence or capacity of the IRO Service was not compromised. The increased IRO capacity and stability of social workers has also assisted with the timeliness of care plans and reports being prepared which was, as highlighted in the report, a challenge in 2021/22.
13. During 2021/22, 351 children and young people attended their children looked after review meeting(s); a further 428 contributed to their reviews in other ways (though an advocate/carers etc).

This equates to 94% of those over the age of 4 who contributed to their children looked after review; an increase of 6% compared with 2021/22.

14. For 99.7% of children looked after reviews the IRO consulted with the young person prior to the review meeting in 2021/22; this was an increase of 3.7% compared with the year prior.
15. On occasions, children and young people benefit from an advocate; this can be their parent or carer or through the "Hear Me" advocacy service (provided by the internal Children's Rights & Advocacy Team). Initially a small number of advocates was available but following a business case this was expanded to increase capacity. During 2021/22 there have been a total of 79 children in care who have been supported by an advocate.
16. Some children looked after benefit from an Independent Visitor. An Independent Visitor is a volunteer who visits and befriends the child. Independent Visitors are not family and do not work for the council but can empower some young people by building a trusting, positive relationship.
17. The provision of Independent Visitors was adversely impacted as a result of the pandemic during 2021/22 and an increase in demand for the service was evident. Funding was agreed to increase service provision this year to meet this rise in demand. During 2021/22, 29 children were referred for an Independent Visitor.
18. When an IRO chairs a children looked after review this needs to be recorded. Rather than producing a set of minutes, Independent Reviewing Officers record the children looked after reviews in the format of a letter to the child. This is recognised good practice nationally and makes it easier for the child to engage in the process and to understand their care plan. Independent auditors have commented favourably on the format of these letters.
19. Where an IRO notes drift and delay or other concerns about the child's care plan a 'Dispute' can be raised by the IRO. During 2021/22 there was a significant increase in both informal (132, an increase of 45%) and formal disputes (132, an increase of 165%).
20. The majority of disputes were in respect of drift and delay (24% of informal and 62% of formal disputes). It is encouraging to see this increase in IRO activity and shows that IROs are increasingly able to highlight those areas of practice in need of improvement.
21. Whilst Disputes were raised appropriately, these were not always consistently followed up and progressed. To improve this and to increase the impact on the child the Dispute Resolution Protocol has since been reviewed and refreshed in 2022/23. All IROs are currently following the revised Dispute Resolution Protocol.
22. A Dispute Resolution tracker has also been put in place to ensure a more robust mechanism. The number of outstanding Disputes is also reported to the Performance Meeting. This is a weekly meeting chaired by the Service Director for Safeguarding and Family Support.
23. Independent Reviewing Officers can access independent legal advice if required. This was accessed twice during 2021/22 following concerns about the court appointed Guardian and to provide guidance about the audio and video recording of a review meeting by parents. Both matters were resolved following the provision of independent legal advice.
24. Statutory guidance enables IROs to make a referral to the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS) should they feel appropriate to do. During 2021/22, IROs did not consider this was required and no referrals to CAFCASS were made.
25. No formal complaints were made during 2021/22 in respect of the IROs and the report includes a number of compliments (pages 9 and 10)

26. During 2021/22 a number of initiatives were taken to improve the oversight and effectiveness of the IRO Service. This included the appointment of a Fostering IRO to independently chair “Home Reviews” for the Fostering Service. In addition to this, IROs now also take on a role in respect the quality assurance of Special Guardianship and Fostering Assessments undertaken by an independent assessor.
27. Reflection and training has taken place during 2021/22 to place emphasis on the role of the IROs and strengthen their impact. This has included training, a number of feedback mechanisms to ensure IROs continue to have up-to-date knowledge of legislative frameworks and effective chairing skills.
28. Remuneration was evaluated and a new pay structure for IROs was agreed making the role more attractive and this should assist in the recruitment of permanent staff across the IRO service.
29. In the current financial year, 2022/23 (the year following the year which this report is dedicated to) we have been able to recruit to a number of permanent positions, including the IRO Service Manager and the Head of Service after the previous Head of Service left the Local Authority.
30. As noted, the Dispute Resolution Policy has been reviewed and is now subject to more robust tracking. Reporting in respect of this, mid-point review meeting and the timeliness of children looked after reviews takes place weekly at Performance Meetings.
31. The relationships with social workers has improved due to IROs attending regular meetings, panels and being involved in the auditing of children’s files. This has been further assisted by a more stable workforce both in terms of social workers and managers as well as IROs.
32. The improved relationships between IROs and the service as well as the development work undertaken will ensure care plans are improving and drift and delay is arrested and challenged by IROs where needed.

Community impact

33. The activities of Independent Reviewing Officers have a direct and indirect effect on the lives of both current and future children and families in Herefordshire.
34. The County Plan 2020–2024 includes the ambition to ‘strengthen communities to ensure everyone lives well and safely together’. Specifically, the council aims to:
 - a. Ensure all children are healthy, safe, and inspired to achieve;
 - b. Ensure that children in care, and moving on from care, are well supported and make good life choices; and
 - c. Protect and improve the lives of vulnerable people. Set out any considerations relating to community impact including contribution made to corporate plan / health and wellbeing strategy or other local or national strategies or policies.

Environmental Impact

35. There are no specific environmental impacts arising from this report.

Equality duty

36. 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.

There needs to be a sentence/para here explaining what equality considerations are taken into account. Any diversity monitoring of the service, what the service does to support children with particular needs, that sort of thing.

Resource implications

37. There has been significant investment to gain additional capacity to support Childrens Services, but due to recruitment challenges not all roles have been filled, including some IRO posts. A recruitment campaign has been launched.

Legal implications

38. There are no explicit legal implications in respect of this report.

Risk management

Risk / opportunity	Mitigation
Increased demands on IROs could result in a lesser quality service provided by them.	There is an ongoing recruitment campaign and additional interim capacity has been provided.

Consultees

39. There has been no public consultation on this paper

Appendices

Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) Annual Report 2021/2022

Background papers

None identified

Report Reviewers Used for appraising this report:

Please note this section must be completed before the report can be published

Governance	John Coleman	Date 30/01/2023
Finance	Click or tap here to enter text.	Date Click or tap to enter a date.
Legal	Click or tap here to enter text.	Date Click or tap to enter a date.
Communications	Luenne Featherstone	Date 30/01/2023
Equality Duty	Click or tap here to enter text.	Date Click or tap to enter a date.
Procurement	Lee Robertson	Date 30/01/2023
Risk	Click or tap here to enter text.	Date Click or tap to enter a date.

Approved by Darryl Freeman Date 31/01/2023