

18 December 2014		ITEM: URGENT
<b>Corporate Parenting Committee</b>		
<b>Independent Reviewing Officers Annual Report 2013-14</b>		
<b>Wards and communities affected:</b> All	<b>Key Decision:</b> None Key	
<b>Report of: Neale Laurie - Service Manager Safeguarding and Child Protection</b>		
<b>Accountable Head of Service: Andrew Carter – Head of Children’s Social Care</b>		
<b>Accountable Director: Carmel Littleton – Director of Children’s Services</b>		
<b>This report is: Public</b>		

### **Executive Summary:**

This report is the annual summary of activity undertaken by the Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) 2013-14 who provide Independent Scrutiny of the Department’s care plans for all the Children Looked After by Thurrock Council. An Annual Report of the Independent Reviewing Service for Children Looked After is required in the guidance arising from the Adoption and Children Act 2002 section 118 which amended Section 26 of the Children Act 1989. To provide information on the role of the Independent Review Officers and update on the Statutory Review Services activity for Children Looked After.

### **1. Recommendation**

**The role of the Independent Reviewing Officers is a statutory responsibility and therefore it is recommended that The Corporate Parenting Committee continues to monitor the activity of the IROs and request any further information it requires in its scrutiny role.**

### **2. Introduction and Background**

- 2.1 The Independent Review Officers’ (IRO) service is set within the framework of the updated IRO Handbook, linked to revised Care Planning Regulations and Guidance which were introduced in April 2011. The responsibility of the IRO has changed from 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 of Care Planning for Children Looked After (CLA) and for challenging drift and delay.

- 2.2 Every Child Looked After should have a named IRO to provide continuity in the oversight of the case and to enable the IRO to develop a consistent relationship with the child. The child's Care Plan must be completed by the Social Worker within 10 working days of the child becoming Looked After and the IRO must be named in it. In Thurrock, we meet this requirement, with most young people being allocated an IRO within 24 hours of being notified that they have come into care.
- 2.3 The IRO has two clear functions to chair the child's review and to monitor the child's case on an ongoing basis. In order to provide ongoing monitoring, the draft guidance recommended that IROs should have caseloads of approximately 50 children. Following representations from local authorities regarding resources, the final version has changed this to 50-70 cases. During this period, this has been manageable, however with increased numbers of looked after children, this may have resource implications for the future.
- 2.4 IROs must spend time with the child before each review, to prepare them for the meeting and to be satisfied that that the child has been properly consulted about any proposals for their future. IROs regularly meet and remain in contact with young people, either face to face, by phone, text or sometimes email. IROs are expected to either have the skills or access to specialist input so that they can establish the views of children with communication difficulties or complex needs.
- 2.5 The participation of children and young people in their reviews is good and continues to be an area of growth ensuring the voice of the child is heard. Advocacy services are also used to ensure their voices are included. The Team in conjunction with the Children in Care Council have developed an alert card, to be used at times when a young person is worried about their safety and is unable to raise this with their carer.
- 2.6 IROs have the authority to adjourn meetings if they are not satisfied that the review has all the information necessary to make a rounded judgement about the viability of the child's Care Plan and whether any proposals are in the child's best interests. If the review is adjourned, it must be completed within 20 working days. On occasions it is necessary to hold reviews as a series of meetings, this ensures that all the parties and information is available and considered.
- 2.7 Referral by an IRO of a case to CAFCASS (Children and Families Court Advisory Service) should no longer be seen as a last resort but can be considered at any time. Consultations have taken place, however it has not been necessary to refer a Thurrock case to CAFCASS during this reporting period.
- 2.8 The team also leads on Children's Participation, monitoring and tracking all Children Looked After (CLA).

- 2.9 There is an expectation that the IRO service scrutinise the care planning and are actively taken forward with more robust tracking and challenge.
- 2.10 The increase in the CLA population has led to higher caseloads but IROs continue to monitor those cases highlighted as at risk of drift and used the escalation protocol effectively, managing the greater number of escalations at the Manager level, which leads to a quicker resolution of the issue.
- 2.11 IRO's are continuing to work in partnership with the Children in Care Council and have helped produce a DVD about children in care.

### **3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options**

- 3.1 The IRO team is made up of 1 senior and 3 IRO Full Time posts (with an additional temporary full time IRO).
- 3.2 The core team of IRO's has remained stable during this financial year however as mentioned additional resource has been provided to meet increasing demand.
- 3.3 The team is supported by 78 hours administration support. This last year we have had a number of staff changes with the administration team -1 long term sickness and three changes of staff members.
- 3.4 Current administrator tasks also include overseeing the missing young people, which provides an additional challenge.
- 3.5 A total of 284 children have been through the system in the 12 months.  
A total of 659 reviews were held in the year.  
Of the total 659 reviews 98.5% were completed on time which is significantly above the English and Statistical Neighbour data at 90.5% and 90.6% respectively.  
284 children were in care as at 31/03/2014.  
A significant number of older children reached 18 years whilst there has been a steady and appropriate increase in the number of younger children coming into care.

#### **3.6 Ethnic Origin of Children Looked After at 31<sup>st</sup> March 2014**

White	<b>210</b>
Mixed	<b>23</b>
Asian or Asian British	<b>17</b>
Black or Black British	<b>21</b>
Other ethnic groups	<b>13</b>
<b>TOTAL :</b>	<b>284</b>

The IRO's within the care plan explore issues of diversity and ensure they are addressed appropriately where necessary.

Culturally sensitive and gender appropriate placements are identified where necessary and appropriate. This is particularly relevant to the influx of unaccompanied asylum seekers. Interpreters are routinely used to identify and meet their needs both within the care planning and review process.

The Department provides a dedicated Team for young people with a disability and reviews are conducted in a manner that is sensitive to their communication methods, to enable participation where at all possible, for example, signing or picture/computer input.

Recognition of young people's ethnicity is also recognised for example the inclusion of Travellers Welfare Service for some young people

- 3.7 As the CLA population has fluctuated over the period caseloads have varied between 70 and 85. This is set against a recommended 50-70 within the IRO Handbook.
- 3.8 IROs average between 35 - 50 Reviews in any given month, a mix of first Reviews and subsequent Reviews. All Reviews are booked by the administration of Plans and Reviews does ensure that an IRO is available within timescale and also acts as the allocation process for new work.
- 3.9 IROs have also represented the service on a number of strategies.
- 3.10 Disruptions of long term and placement breakdown and other meeting related to children in care are carried out by IROs.
- 3.11 Case load for IRO  
The size of caseload alone does not indicate the workload for each IRO; this is also based on the number of Out of Borough placements(65% as of 31<sup>st</sup> march 2014), large family groups, disability, UAS, Pathway Plan reviews for 18 year, Section 85(Young people in Hospital for three months plus) and since December 2012 Young People in remand. Due to the capacity issues and increase in numbers the IRO service is no longer undertaking Short break Reviews.
- 3.12 There has been a steady increase in young people attending their reviews and positively participating in them. IROs have been told to actively seek the views of children who do not wish to attend their reviews and to see what would assist in getting them there. There have been a number of cases where the IRO has supported the young person in chairing their own review or setting their own agendas.

	Number of Reviews
Child aged under 4 at the time of the review	135
Child physically attends and speaks for him or herself	285
Child physically attends and an advocate speaks on his or her	6

behalf	
Child physically attends but does not speak for him or herself, does not convey his or her view symbolically (non-verbally) and does not ask an advocate to speak for him or her	2
Child does not attend physically but briefs an advocate to speak for him or her	39
Child does not attend but conveys his or her feelings to the review by a facilitative medium	123
Child does not attend nor are his or her views conveyed to the review	67
Child physically attends but does not speak for him or herself, does convey his or her view symbolically (non-verbally) and does not ask an advocate to speak for him or her	2
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>659</b>

3.13 Parents' active participation has improved with an average of 75% of parents being involved in reviews either through attendance, completing a consultation booklet or meeting the IRO separate to the review meeting.

3.14 Distribution of completed review Outcomes and reports remains a significant challenge and does not always meet the required timescale with around only 40% being completed within 20 working days of the review. A review of the working practices is underway to address this issue, with expectations of improving this outcome; however resources remain a significant pressure.

3.15 Conduct of the Organisation in relation to the Review  
Areas for consideration include:

- Timeliness of reviews
- Preparation of young person/family for the review
- Preparation of Pre-Meeting Report (PMR)
- Quality of Pre-Meeting Report/Care Plan and SW presentation to the review
- Management oversight

3.16 IROs complete over 98.5% of their first reviews in a series of meetings to ensure we meet timescale.

3.17 There have been no late subsequent reviews and these are booked in timescale leaving some flexibility in the time for change. In most cases undertaking a 2 part review and adjourning it has been the best way forward.

3.18 Young people report in their feedback that they feel satisfied with the level of support from their SW in preparation for the review (other than venues).

3.19 Families are often well prepared but the sharing of reports prior to the review continues to be adhoc with some excellent practice in some areas. Engagement with parents especially where the child has limited contact is essential to planning for the child as we are aware that between 14 and 19 most young people will make attempts to meet with family members. The use

of Social network has increased this and we need to ensure that this is monitored and safe for young people.

- 3.20 Young people have told us that they do not find the pre meeting report format easy to read or understand. Work is currently being undertaken by social work teams, IRO and LCS to review the current report formats and make them more user friendly.
- 3.21 Similarly IROs need to ensure that the Outcomes and Report are accessible to children and parents.
- 3.22 IROs continue to review the written care plans and comment on the quality in the review. The quality of care planning varies and IRO's continue to work with the Social Work Teams around expectations.
- 3.23 The Guidance states that Managers must consider the Outcomes from the Review before they are finalised. Once the Outcomes are completed the Team Manager has 5 days to respond. The IRO will e mail the Team manager to the fact the Outcomes are available. If nothing is heard in the 5 days the IRO will finalise the reports in preparation for distribution.
- 3.24 Dispute resolution and escalation  
The department has a dispute resolution protocol.
- 3.25 The cases of concern process is in place to both record escalations to Senior Managers as well as looking at those cases resolved at a lower level between IRO/Practice Managers/ Managers.
- 3.26 In total 56 cases have been raised by IROs with the biggest majority being dealt with at SW/Team Manager level. 7 at Service Manager level and one at head of service level.
- Areas escalated have included
  - Drift and Delay including Policy and Procedures not being followed
  - Paperwork incomplete
  - Statutory duties not fulfilled (Health Assessments, Visits etc)
  - Education issues
  - Lack of Management oversight
  - Transition
  - Changes to care plans without the notifications to IRO
- 3.27 Any resource issues that are putting at risk the delivery of a quality service for CLA
- 3.28 The IRO role is not to identify the Resources needed to meet a young person's needs but to ensure that those resources utilised match the needs of the young person and are of a high quality.

- 3.29 IROs will challenge when the placement fails to address needs and alert and consultation is made to Fostering Manager for reviews in some cases
- 3.30 The processes involving Fostering team is working well and has improved as has the communication between IROs and fostering through the sharing of the information.
- 3.31 The issue relating to a move from regulated to unregulated placement has been discussed and it is clear the IRO should be made aware immediately there is any suggestion that the young person's plan is such a move

#### **4. Areas for development**

##### **4.1 Annual work programme of the IRO service**

(i.e. priority areas for improvement and action in the IRO service in the coming year.)

- 4.2 The Children's information booklet was updated this year into ***The Really Useful Book*** which has been well received.
- 4.3 Postcards and information about the IRO is sent out at first and second reviews. IROs carry Complaints and Advocacy information to give out when required.
- 4.4 Areas for improvement are the completion of ALL reports within timescale. A review of processes is underway to address this.
- 4.5 The IRO service continues to consider new ways of enabling young disabled people to participate and be included in their reviews. Young people are supported to participate where possible via a variety of communication methods, for example picture boards. However, online methods of participation are also being explored.
- 4.6 IROs regularly refer children to Open Door for individual advocacy

#### **5. Implications**

##### **5.1 Financial**

Implications verified by: **Kay Goodacre**

Telephone and email: **01375 652466**

[kgoodacre@thurrock.gov.uk](mailto:kgoodacre@thurrock.gov.uk)

The additional appointment of a fulltime IRO, to meet the volume pressures has impacted upon the budget creating an overspend for 2014/15, equivalent

to a full time salary. This will be addressed as part of the budget planning process for 2015/16.

## 5.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Lindsey Marks**  
Telephone and email: **01375 652054**  
[Lindsey.Marks@BDTLegal.org.uk](mailto:Lindsey.Marks@BDTLegal.org.uk)

Section 118 Adoption and Children Act 2002 introduced the concept Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs). The Children and Young Persons Act 2008 extends the IRO's responsibilities from monitoring the performance by the Local Authority of their functions in relation to child's review to monitoring the performance by the Local Authority of their functions in relation to a child's case as set out in sections 25A - 25C of the Children Act 1989. The intention is that IRO's should have an effective independent oversight of the child's case and ensure that the child's interests are protected throughout the care planning process. The IRO Handbook provides clear guidance on the IROs' role in and processes around the case review:

## 5.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by Natalie Warren  
Telephone and email: [nwarren@thurrock.gov.uk](mailto:nwarren@thurrock.gov.uk)

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## 5.4 Other implications (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder)

[click this box once - type any other implications that are relevant to this report](#)



**6. Background papers used in preparing the report** (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

- click this box once - type details of any background papers used in the preparation of this report, including the link to the council's website where the background paper can be found - see the report writing guide for details of this legal requirement.

**7. Appendices to the report**

- click this box once - list any appendices to this report

**Report Author:**

Neale Laurie

Service Manager Safeguarding and Protection

Children's Services