

5 January 2021		ITEM: 7
Corporate Parenting Committee		
Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: N/A	
Report of: Ruth Murdock, Strategic Lead of Quality Assurance and Reviewing		
Accountable Assistant Director: Joe Tynan, Assistant Director of Children's Social Care and Early Help.		
Accountable Director: Sheila Murphy, Corporate Director of Children's Services		
This report is public		

Executive Summary

The purpose of this document is to meet the statutory requirement for the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Manager to produce a report for the scrutiny of the Corporate Parenting Committee.

This document should be read in conjunction with the "*Thurrock Children's Services, Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report*" for 2019 – 2020 (see Appendix 1)

1. Recommendation(s)

1.1 For the Corporate Parenting Committee to review and comment on the IRO Annual report 2019 - 2020 and the recommendations in the report.

2. Introduction and Background

2.1 The appointment of an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) for a child or young person in the care of the Local Authority is a legal requirement under s.118 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002.

The IRO has a number of specific responsibilities, including:

- promoting the voice of the child
- ensuring that plans for Children Looked After are based on a detailed and informed assessment, are up to date, effective and provide a real and genuine response to each child's needs
- making sure that the child understands how an advocate could help and his/her entitlement to one

- offering a safeguard to prevent any 'drift' in care planning for Children Looked After and the delivery of services to them; and
- monitoring the activity of the Local Authority as a Corporate Parent in ensuring that care plans have given proper consideration and weight to the child's wishes and feelings and that, where appropriate, the child fully understands

2.2 During the reporting period, the Thurrock IRO Service has remained stable; there have been 2 changes of personnel but the handovers were conducted such that there was no gaps in service for children and young people. The Service comprise of five permanent Independent Reviewing Officers.

The average caseload for IROs is 60 – with a variance between 57 and 62.

During the performance year April 2019 – March 2020, the IRO Service conducted a total of 940 reviews. This is an increase of 185 reviews (24.5%) when compared to the number of reviews conducted the previous year. The performance, in respect of reviews being held within timescale, improved during the year, with the final average being 97.5% of reviews held within timescales; an increase of 4.5% when compared to last year.

This year, children and young people participated in person, or through an advocate, or by another means in 94.6% of their reviews (excludes children under 4 years of age). This was an improvement on last year's performance of 84.0%.

At the end of 2018/19, there was a marked improvement in reports completed by IROs within timescale. This has continued throughout 2019/20 with the timeliness of the reports completed by IROs ranging from 94.4% to 100.0%. For the period April 2019 to March 2020, 97.6% of reports were completed within timescale.

2.3 Profile of Children and Young People in Care in Thurrock

Section 9 of the main report provides a detailed analysis of the characteristics of children moving through the Care System in Thurrock.

Key points from this are:

- There has been a reduction on the number of Children Looked After since 2016; with a rate of 81 per 10,000 (in 2016) to 66.7 per 10,000 (in 2020).
- There has been a reduction in the number of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children.
- There are more boys Looked After in Thurrock than girls, although the

proportion of males has decreased by 21% this year.

- The ethnic distribution of Children Looked After has changed; the proportion of Black British children who are Looked After is now lower than Black British children in the total school population, although there is an over-representation of children from mixed / dual backgrounds.
- There continues to be a significant reduction in the use of Voluntary Accommodation (Section 20 CA1989), which is positive.
- 70% of Children Looked After live within 20 miles of their home address, although the complex needs of some children results in it not being possible to find local placements. The majority of children not placed in Thurrock are placed in neighbouring boroughs of Essex, Greater London or Kent.
- There has been an increase in the number of children achieving permanency through adoption.

2.4 Feedback from Children and Young People about the IRO service

At a recent activity day, the views of children and young people were sought by the IRO Service. The main feedback from children and young people about the IRO Service and the Review Process was as follows:

- 100% of children or young people wanted their reports shared with them in advance of their meeting.
- Only 16% of children felt the School Nurse should be at their review and only 50% wanted their Teacher to attend.
- 91% of children stated that they would like to participate in their review and 41% stated they would like to chair their own reviews.
- 75% of young people stated they would like their IRO to make contact with them between their reviews.
- Young people were not too worried about the length of time that their review meeting takes, however 80% of them stated that they would not like their reviews to take place at their school.

This feedback has been instrumental in helping the IRO Service to shape how reviews are conducted going forward, so that information is gathered outside of the meeting and fewer professionals need to attend; issues which are important to the young person are discussed; to work towards young people chairing their own reviews, deciding where the meeting should be held and participate in setting the agenda; and IROs will be undertaking mid-way visits to the children and young people.

3 Issues Options and Analysis of Options

None

4 Reasons for Recommendation

- 4.1 To inform members of the work of the Independent Reviewing Officer Service during 2019-2020. The report also updates members with the recommended work plan for the IRO service during 2020 – 2021.

5 Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

Not Applicable

6 Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community

Not Applicable

7 Implications

7.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **David May,
Strategic Lead, Finance**

There are no financial implications associated with this report.

7.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Judith Knight
Interim Deputy Head of Legal (Education and
Social Care)**

Section 118 Adoption and Children Act 2002 introduced the concept Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs). Since 2004 all Local Authorities have been required to appoint 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. The IRO Handbook is statutory guidance and includes the requirement that an annual report is produced for the Corporate Parenting Panel covering the matters set out in paragraph 7.11 of that document.

7.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Roxanne Scanlon,
Community Engagement and Project
Monitoring Officer**

The Service is committed to practice which promotes inclusion and diversity, and will carry out its duties in accordance with the Equality Act 2010 and related Codes of Practice and Anti-discriminatory policy. Members of the service represent diverse backgrounds and heritage and are able to promote equality and diversity.

7.4 Other implications (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder, or Impact on Looked After Children)

Not Applicable

8. 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):

Not Applicable

9. Appendices to the report

- Appendix 1 - IRO Annual Report 1 April 2019 – 31 March 2020

Report Author:

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