

<b>25<sup>th</sup> January 2024</b>		<b>ITEM: 7</b>
<b>Corporate Parenting Committee</b>		
<b>Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report</b>		
<b>Wards and communities affected:</b> All	<b>Key Decision:</b> Non-key	
<b>Report of:</b> Ruth Murdock, Head of Service, Quality Assurance and Reviewing, Trevor Willis Service Manager, Safeguarding and Reviewing		
<b>Accountable Assistant Director:</b> Janet Simon, Assistant Director, Children’s Social Care and Early Help		
<b>Accountable Director:</b> Sheila Murphy, Executive Director, Children’s Services		
<b>This report is:</b> 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 2022 – 2023 (see Appendix 1)

### 1. Recommendation(s)

**1.1 For the Corporate Parenting Committee to review, provide challenge and comment on the IRO Annual report 2022 - 2023 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 no changes of personnel. The Service comprises of five permanent Independent Reviewing Officers.

The average caseload for IROs is 60 – with a variance between 59 and 62.

During the performance year April 2022 – March 2023, the IRO Service conducted a total of 800 reviews. This is a decrease of 133 reviews (14.25%) when compared to the number of reviews conducted the previous year. The performance, in respect of reviews being held within timescale, remained consistent compared to the previous year with 98.7% held within time.

This year, children and young people participated in person, or through an advocate, or by another means by providing their views in the majority of reviews. Only 0.84% of reviews were conducted (for children over the age of 4) where they did not attend nor send their views- representing 6 instances. Children and young people are encouraged to feed back their views by the 'Mind of My Own' App alongside speaking with their carers, allocated social workers and IRO.

For the period April 2022 to March 2023, 98.5% of review reports were completed within timescale by the IRO's.

2.3 Profile of Children and Young People in Care in Thurrock

Section 8 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:

- The rate of Children Looked After at the end of March 2023 per 10,000 of the child population was 66 which is in line with statistical neighbour at 68 and slightly below the figures nationally at 70 per 10,000 (2021/22). The monthly breakdown for the numbers of children looked after has remained relatively stable and consistent throughout the year ranging from 281-293

- The number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children rose by seventeen young people to 45 at the end of March 2023- this increase reflects quotas set by national government in August 2022. This represents 15.3% of the total cohort of children and young people accommodated.
- The number of children adopted has increased to 13 children compared to last year -8 children. This increase is due to a backlog of cases held up in the legal system either due to the impact of Covid or legal challenge from parents.
- There are more boys Looked After in Thurrock than girls (62% and 38% respectively) – and increase of 1% for boys from 2021-22
- Black British children are not overrepresented in the looked after population at 15% which compares to the school census data (2022) of 15%, although children from mixed/dual heritage backgrounds are 10% compared to the school census data of 7%
- The majority of children looked after are subject to legal orders at 74.9% which shows a desire to achieve permanence and stability for children.
- 28.67 of Children Looked After live over 20 miles from their home address. This has risen by 4.67 and largely relates to the complex needs of some children which results in it not being possible to find local placements. The majority of children not placed in Thurrock (or within 20 miles) are placed in neighbouring boroughs of Essex, Greater London or Kent

#### 2.4 Feedback from Children and Young People about their care plans

In January 2023 QR codes were introduced to CLA review forms which enable young people to give feedback from their reviews and these were only becoming more regularly used in March 23. Also, IROs attend children and young people participation events and encourage the children they work with to attend and take part.

IROs continue to look at creative and interactive ways of involving children and young people, including how reviews are recorded in a more accessible and personal format, focusing in on what interests a young person to annotate the CLA review document.

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

Please see the attached IRO Annual Report.

### **4 Reasons for Recommendation**

- 4.1 To inform members of the work of the Independent Reviewing Officer Service during 2022-2023. The report also updates members with their recommended work plan for the IRO service during 2023 – 2024.

**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 (Social Care & Education)**

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 which states:

- procedures for resolving concerns, including the local dispute resolution process and it should include an analysis of the issues raised in dispute and the outcomes;
- the development of the IRO service including information on caseloads, continuity of employment and the make up of the team

and how it reflects the identity of the children it is serving;

- extent of participation of children and their parents;
- the number of reviews that are held on time, the number that are held out of time and the reasons for the ones that are out of time;
- outcomes of quality assurance audits in relation to the organisation, conduct and recording of reviews;
- whether any resource issues are putting at risk the delivery of a quality service to all looked after children.

### 7.3 **Diversity and Equality**

Implications verified by: **Rebecca Lee**  
**Team Manager, Community Development and Equalities**

An overview of the profile and diversity of children and young people in care in Thurrock is set out in section 8.3 of this report.

The Service is committed to practice which promotes inclusion and diversity, and will carry out its duties in accordance with the Equality Act 2010, Public Sector Equality Duty 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 Inequalities, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder, and 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 2022 – 31 March 2023

**Report Authors:**

Trevor Willis

Service Manager Safeguarding, Reviewing and Child Protection  
Children's Services

Ruth Murdock

Head of Service Quality Assurance and Reviewing  
Children's Services