

Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report 2022/23

To: Corporate Parenting Sub-Committee

Meeting Date: 12th July 2023

From: Service Director, Quality Assurance and Practice Improvement

Electoral division(s): All

Key decision: No

Outcome: This report is submitted annually to the Corporate Parenting Sub-Committee for review.

Recommendation: The Corporate Parenting Sub-Committee is recommended to:

- a) Note the content of the report.
- b) Raise any questions with the lead officer.

Officer contact:

Name: Olly Grant
Post: Service Manager, Independent Reviewing Officers
Email: olly.grant@cambridgeshire.gov.uk
Tel: 07787 837944

Member contacts:

Names: Councillor Anna Bradnam/ Councillor Michael Atkins
Role: Chair/ Vice Chair
Email: anna.bradnam@cambridgeshire.gov.uk
Michael.atkins@cambridgeshire.gov.uk
Tel: 01223 706398 (office)

1. Background

- 1.1 The appointment of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) is a legal requirement under s.118 of the Adoption and Children Act (2002). Amendments to statutory guidance in 2010 embedded the IRO role further within 'Care Planning Placement and Case Review' and 'The IRO Handbook'.
- 1.2 The IRO Handbook states: 'The manager should be responsible for the production of an annual report for the scrutiny of the members of the corporate parenting panel. This report should identify good practice but should also highlight issues for further development, including where urgent action is needed.' (IRO Handbook 2010, page 48, paragraph 7.11.)

2. Main Issues

- 2.1 **Purpose of the IRO Service:** It is a key responsibility of the IRO to ensure that the local authority gives due consideration to the views expressed by the child within care planning. The core mechanism for reviewing the child's care plan and ascertaining the child's wishes and feelings is the child's 'Child in Care' (CIC) Review, which are held at statutory intervals. The IRO has a responsibility to monitor the local authority's performance of its functions in relation to the child's case. If the IRO has concerns with respect to drift or delay within the child's care planning, they will escalate the issue through the Case Alert and Dispute Resolution Protocol.
- 2.2 **Profile of the population of children in care:** There were 632 children in care at the end of March 2023.
- 2.3 **Performance of the IRO service:** Each IRO works with approximately 66 children in care, which is considered to be a moderate caseload. Over 99% of Children in Care reviews were in timescale during the year.
- 2.4 **Voice of the child in care planning:** This year 66% of children over the age of 4 attended their Reviews in person, although not all children and young people wish to attend their meetings. 26% conveyed their views via another person, met with their IRO separately or completed a consultation document.
- 2.5 **Observations of the operational practice and performance with children and young people in care:** Over the year, IROs raised 405 escalations to social care managers to prompt them to address the specific issues of drift or delay raised. This is comparable to the number of escalations raised the previous year. Most issues raised were in relation to issues with the child's holistic needs or rights being addressed.
- 2.6 **Unplanned endings of children's long-term placements:** Over the year 26 long-term foster placements ended prematurely and resulted in emergency moves to children. Nearly a quarter of these children were aged 17 when the placement ended.
- 2.7 **Impact of the IRO service:** There is evidence that decisions made by IROs during Children in Care reviews and where necessary any subsequent escalations, have positively impacted children. More detailed examples of this impact are described in the report attached. The IRO's independent oversight on planning for children enables them to support the social work team to keep focus on the needs and views of children and young people throughout their care journey.

2.8 IRO Service Action Plan 2023-24:

Objective 1: Strengthen IROs focus on possible Care Plans for reunification or options for moving into the care of wider family as the child gets older.

Objective 2: Finalise the Pathway Planning Project with the new version of the Pathway Plan being implemented.

Objective 3: Review the policy and procedures for IROs involvement with Secure Accommodation Reviews.

Objective 4: Review the IRO Escalation Protocol to ensure that it is as efficient as possible in its aim of challenging drift or delay on behalf of children where necessary.

Objective 5: Evaluate IROs methods of quality assuring the suitability of placements and support for children with disabilities living in residential care settings.

3. Alignment with the Council's ambitions

3.1 Net zero carbon emissions for Cambridgeshire by 2045, and our communities and natural environment are supported to adapt and thrive as the climate changes.

There are no significant implications for this priority.

3.2 Travel across the county is safer and more environmentally sustainable.

There are no significant implications for this priority.

3.3 Health inequalities are reduced.

There are no significant implications for this priority.

3.4 People enjoy healthy, safe, and independent lives through timely support that is most suited to their needs.

Implications for this Ambition relate to improved pathway planning for care leavers.

3.5 Helping people out of poverty and income inequality.

Implications for this Ambition relate to improved pathway planning for care leavers.

3.6 Places and communities prosper because they have a resilient and inclusive economy, access to good quality public services and social justice is prioritised.

There are no significant implications for this priority.

3.7 Children and young people have opportunities to thrive.

Implications for this Ambition relate to improved care planning and suitable placements for all young people in care to achieve their full potentials.

4. Significant Implications

4.1 None.

5. Source documents

5.1 None.