

Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report 2020-21

To: Corporate Parenting Sub-Committee

Meeting Date: 14 July 2021

From: Nicola Curley Assistant Director Early Help and Children's Social Care

Electoral division(s): All

Forward Plan ref: n/a

Key decision: No

Outcome: This report is submitted to each formal and informal Corporate Parenting Sub Committee as part of the standing work programme item in relation to performance.

Recommendation: The Sub-Committee is recommended to:

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

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Summary

1.1 Key highlights of this report are:

- The number of children in care fell by 75 this year
- Timeliness of statutory Child in Care Reviews continues to be excellent
- There is improvement in the proportion of children in care who are settled in 'permanence' arrangements
- Most of the issues raised by Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) through the Case Alert protocol are about issues of accountability or record keeping

2. Background

1.1 The appointment of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) is a legal requirement under Section 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 Profile of the population of children in care: There were 643 children in care at the end of March 2020.

2.2 Performance of the IRO Service: Each IRO works with approximately 60 children and young people; this caseload is considered to be moderate. Over 99% of Child in Care (CIC) Reviews were held within statutory timescales, a similar level to last year.

2.3 Voice of the child in care planning: This year Reviews have mostly taken place as virtual meetings due to the coronavirus restrictions. The greatest impact of the virtual nature of Reviews has been on the IRO's ability to elicit the views of some children, particularly those with disabilities, young children or those who use interpreters, where face to face conversations are significantly more effective. On the other hand, there were indications that for some young people participating via virtual platform was more comfortable than attending Reviews in person, and as such there were some who were more talkative and engaged in their Reviews when online. In total this year 55% of children over the age of 4 attended their CIC Reviews in person. This is the same proportion as the previous year, illustrating that the switch to virtual Reviews has not presented a significant barrier for children's participation overall.

2.4 Observations of the operational practice and performance with children and young people in care:

2.4.1 Permanence overview of all children in care 2020-21:

53% Permanence achieved / sufficiently prepared for leaving care

- 27%** Care planning is progressing as planned
- 20%** Action is needed to progress the care plan

2.4.2 IROs raised 506 escalations to social care managers to prompt them to address the specific issues of drift or delay highlighted. This number can reflect more than one alert raised on an individual case. This is fewer than over the previous year. One hypothesis for this is around the reduction in the number of children in care, as well as areas of improved practice.

2.4.3 The types of issues raised by IROs fell loosely into eight categories:

- 34%** Accountability and record keeping
- 22%** Planning for permanence
- 13%** Preparation for leaving care
- 11%** Safeguarding
- 10%** Child's holistic rights or needs
- 4%** Professional network / communication
- 3%** Funding decisions
- 3%** Child's legal status

2.5 Impact of the IRO Service:

2.5.1 The escalations raised by IROs elicit immediate management attention where there are issues causing drift or delay. Over the last year 77% of IRO Alerts are resolved as soon as they are received by the relevant social work Team Managers. This shows that, in the instances where social work practice has fallen below standard, the IRO has been instrumental in ensuring plans get back on track quickly.

2.5.2 Written feedback from young people about their IROs was generally very positive. The majority of young people said they always feel that their IRO listens to them, always feels their IRO is open and honest, and they always feel supported during their Reviews.

2.6 IRO Service Action Plan 2021-22:

Objective 1: Continue to strengthen the relationship between the IRO Service and the Children in Care Council (CiCC). The IRO Service Manager has also taken on an interim management role with the Participation service which will support the collaborative opportunities between the IROs and CiCC.

Objective 2: Continue to enhance the IROs 'footprint' on the child's record, evidencing the IRO's involvement and oversight of the case progression.

Objective 3: Review the format of consultation forms for children so that they can be completed quickly and easily via an online form as well as through paper consultation forms.

Objective 4: Strengthen the IRO oversight of pathway planning to support successful and timely moves to independence for young people leaving care.

Objective 5: Continue to support placement stability as this is key to the emotional wellbeing of children and young people. IROs will continue to conduct independent evaluations of

unplanned endings in foster placements (through 'Placement Breakdown Meetings') and will also undertake appreciative enquiries of what works well, so that all learning can be woven back into practice.

3. Alignment with corporate priorities

- 3.1 A good quality of life for everyone
There are no significant implications for this priority.
- 3.2 Thriving places for people to live
There are no significant implications for this priority.
- 3.3 The best start for Cambridgeshire's children
The report above sets out the implications for this priority.
- 3.4 Net zero carbon emissions for Cambridgeshire by 2050
There are no significant implications for this priority.

4. Significant Implications

- 4.1 Resource Implications
There are no significant implications within this category.
- 4.2 Procurement/Contractual/Council Contract Procedure Rules Implications
There are no significant implications within this category.
- 4.3 Statutory, Legal and Risk Implications
There are no significant implications within this category.
- 4.4 Equality and Diversity Implications
There are no significant implications within this category.
- 4.5 Engagement and Communications Implications
There are no significant implications within this category.
- 4.6 Localism and Local Member Involvement
There are no significant implications within this category.
- 4.7 Public Health Implications
There are no significant implications within this category.

5. Source documents

- 5.1 Source documents
None