

Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report 2021-22

To: Corporate Parenting Sub-Committee

Meeting Date: 3rd August 2022

From: Ricky Cooper Assistant Director, Children's Services
Fostering, Regional Adoption and Specialist Young People's Services

Electoral division(s): All

Key decision: No

Forward Plan ref: Not applicable

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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1. Summary

- 1.1 This report provides an overview of the activities of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) in Cambridgeshire for the period 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2022.
- 1.2 Highlights of the report include commentary on the cohort of children in care, which rose in number by 5 to 592 during the year.
- 1.3 The IRO service held 1,655 Child In Care Reviews during the year, and timeliness of these reviews remained excellent.
- 1.4 Children and families' feedback reflected positively the IROs use of their skills to amplify the voice of the child in Care Planning.
- 1.5 IROs use of the Escalation Protocol remains fully embedded across the service and evidences the IROs oversight of care planning for children.

2. Background

- 2.1 The appointment of the 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'.
- 2.2 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.)

3. Main Issues

- 3.1 **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.
- 3.2 **Profile of the population of children in care:** There were 592 children in care at the end of March 2020.
- 3.3 **Professional Profile of the IRO service:** There is one Service Manager and 8.8 full-time equivalent IROs in the team.
- 3.4 **Performance of the IRO service:** Each IRO works with approximately 61 children in care, which is considered to be a moderate caseload. Over 99% of Children in Care

reviews were in timescale during the year.

- 3.5 **Voice of the child in care planning:** This year 56% of children over the age of 4 attended their Reviews in person, although not all children and young people wish to attend their meetings. 27% conveyed their views via another person, met with their IRO separately or completed a consultation document.
- 3.6 **Observations of the operational practice and performance with children and young people in care:** Over the year, IROs raised 404 escalations to social care managers to prompt them to address the specific issues of drift or delay raised. This is roughly two-thirds of the number of escalations raised the previous year. The types of issues raised by IROs fell loosely into the following categories:
- Planning for permanence
 - Accountability and record-keeping
 - Preparation for leaving care
 - Safeguarding
 - Child's holistic needs or rights
 - Professional network issues
 - Child's legal status
 - Funding decisions
- 3.7 **Feedback on the IRO service:** Feedback from children and young people was generally positive this year – children and young people said they feel their IRO listens to them, that their IRO is open and honest, and they feel supported during their Children in Care Reviews.
- 3.8 **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.
- 3.9 **Review of the IRO Service Action plan for 2021-22:** Please see the full report, attached.
- 3.10 **IRO Service Action Plan 2022-23:**

Objective 1: Continue to review the existing mechanisms for a constructive feedback loop between the IRO Service and social care.

Objective 2: Continue to progress the Pathway Planning Project, with IROs supporting the development of improved versions of pathway plan templates for social workers and personal advisers to use as a basic tool when planning with young people preparing to leave care.

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: Review the existing format of the social worker's pre-review report which is shared with the IRO prior to the child's CIC Review, to make sure that this is sufficiently informed by the child's views and experiences.

Objective 5: Integrate the local authority's 'Promise' to children in care into the usual agenda for CIC Reviews, so that children and young people can give their feedback directly in relation to whether they feel the commitments that the local authority has made to them are being delivered in reality.

Objective 6: IROs to strengthen their oversight of children missing from education or care.

4. Alignment with corporate priorities

4.1 Environment and Sustainability

There are no significant implications for this priority.

4.2 Health and Care

here are no significant implications for this priority.

4.3 Places and Communities

There are no significant implications for this priority.

4.4 Children and Young People

Implications for this Priority are detailed in 3.1 and 3.6 above.

4.5 Transport

There are no significant implications for this priority.

5. Source documents

5.1 None.