

Independent Reviewing Officer Service

**Presentation to: Children and Young People's Scrutiny
Committee 10 October 2017**

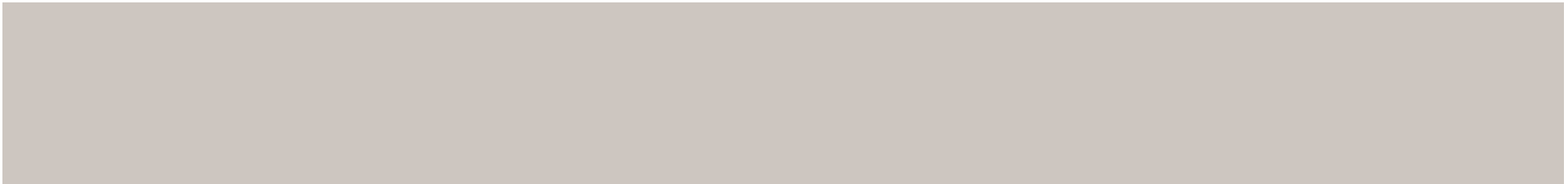
Linda Evans (Head of Quality Assurance for Safeguarding)

Purpose of the Independent Reviewing Officer role is to.....

The Statutory role and function of the Independent Reviewing Officer is to:

- ensure that practice, plans and arrangements for the child are of a good quality and reflect their current needs and promote their safety and well-being.
- ensure actions set out in the plan are consistent with the local authority's statutory responsibilities towards the child.
- ensure that the care plan for a looked after child fully reflects the child's needs and that each child's wishes and feelings are given full and due consideration.
- monitor the performance by the local authority of their functions in relation to the child's case
- chair LAC reviews, robustly monitor cases in-between times and raise escalations if there is drift of concerns about practice, plans and arrangements.

Independent Reviewing Officer have a critical role to play in driving practice development and improvement.



2014 Ofsted findings and recommendations in relation to the IRO Service and our current position

Ofsted Inspection findings 2014

IRO's do not challenge poor social work practice effectively and quality assurance processes are not used to drive up collective performance. Care planning for children is variable and although regularly reviewed, there is insufficient challenge from IRO's to address drift in plans.

2017 Monitoring Visit

IRO's are now demonstrating much improved performance and are scrutinising practice, plans and arrangements for Looked After Children. However there continues to be some variability in practice and further improvement is required. We are supporting IRO development and working to further improve practice and performance.

The monitoring visit letter published on the 25th January 2017 states:

'Inspectors found that progress has been made to improve the effectiveness of the safeguarding unit. Caseloads have now reduced; this has assisted child protection chairs and IROs to have an increased influence in cases. There is evidence of their increased scrutiny in the majority of cases Seen. Strengthened auditing processes have resulted in increased levels of oversight and this is beginning to impact on practice'

2014 Ofsted findings and recommendations in relation to the IRO Service and our current position

Ofsted Inspection findings 2014

Some conferences and reviews do not receive social work reports and the allocated Worker does not attend. These meetings, and consequently the outcomes, are compromised as a result.

IRO caseloads are high, with an average of 110.

2017 Monitoring Visit

There has been an improvement in social work practice. In 2016/2017 the allocated social worker provided reports to LAC reviews in 94.6% of cases and attendance by the allocated social worker or their manager was 94.3%,

The monitoring visit letter published on the 13th June 2017 confirmed evidence of this progress. 'Looked after children reviews seen were Timely, with regular attendance by social workers and minutes that evidenced clear recording of discussions, actions and timescales. Case sampling evidenced independent reviewing officers' involvement in the case, with appropriate challenge and escalation when required'.

Service resourcing has consistently ensured there is an adequate number of Independent Reviewing Officers in post enabling the service to maintain caseloads. The average caseload in 2016/17 for Independent Reviewing Officers was 63 so within the Ofsted recommended range. Resourcing will allow us to maintain this in 2017/2018.

2014 Ofsted findings and recommendations in relation to the IRO Service and our current position cont.

Ofsted Inspection finding 2014 IRO service needs to improve its effectiveness, particularly in relation to listening to the views of children.

2017 Monitoring Visit

Overall participation and engagement in the LAC review process has increased. The number of children attending their LAC reviews has increased by 5.3% when compared to 2015/2016 - improvement is required. Year end data demonstrates the voice of children was evident in 80.81% of LAC reviews. Contribution by attendance at LAC reviews needs to improve from the 35.76% this year.

Audit findings are showing improved performance in relation to capturing the voice children. More details in IRO Impact Section.

IRO's are not always able to meet with children between reviews.

The % of IRO visits taking place in 2016/2017 has improved averaging at 63.1%, this is an improvement when compared to 51.1% in 2015/2016. This data is not routinely collated by other local authorities and therefore we have no comparative data.

Some of the systems to ensure that work is of high quality are not as effective as they should be, i.e. independent reviewing officer escalation.

A Dispute Resolution Protocol was developed and put in place in November 2015 this has now been developed in the MiCare system. This protocol is well understood and is embedded in practice. There were 782 IRO formal dispute resolutions raised in 2016/2017. More details in IRO Impact Section.

2014 Ofsted findings and recommendations in relation to the IRO Service and our current position

Ofsted 2014 Inspection finding 2014 Looked after children reviews are held On time.

Reviewing officers' reports from looked after children reviews are not being uploaded for some weeks or months.

2017 Monitoring Visit

This year 3,265 LAC reviews took place of which 94.1% were in timescales. This is a 1.4% reduction from 2015/2016. Comparator data is not available via DfE year end but I am confident this will be comparable.

Performance is much improved from the 2014 Inspection however we continued to face some challenges in relation to the distribution of minutes. Performance is closely monitored and is tracked on a weekly basis and reviewed at service performance clinics. The Head of Quality Assurance for Safeguarding also receive weekly reports and hold accountability meetings as required.

IRO's are required to create a monitoring record within 24 hours of the review taking place, this happens consistently,

Impact of IRO Service

The IRO service exists to scrutinise practice, plans and arrangements for looked after children and ensure that their individual needs are met and that each child's wishes and feelings are given full consideration. The IRO service is beginning to demonstrate that the scrutiny and challenge offered is making a difference to children's care experience and outcomes for them. The following examples are offered as evidence of IRO impact.

There were 782 IRO formal dispute resolutions raised in 2016/2017; the most common three escalation issues were: No social work report for the looked after child review (102), Care Plan not developed, updated or was insufficient (90) and due to there being no evidence of action on previous recommendations/ from LAC reviews (37). Escalations are always tracked until resolved and improved practice, plans and arrangements for the child are observed.

Since November 2016 there has been just one case where the overall outcomes for the child were judged to be Inadequate in LAC audits, in the six months prior to that an average percentage of Inadequate cases was 15.4% (ranging from 5.3% to 25.0% during the six month period)

Audit is demonstrating an improvement in the overall quality of practice for looked after children. In the six months (January - June) an average of 61.21% of Practice Standards were judged to be MET. In the six months prior to that July-December an average of 48.3% were judged to have MET the required Practice Standards.

In the June 2017 audit the child's voice. 'their ascertainable wishes and feelings' had been sought and **taken into account** by the IRO in 71.0% of cases, in a further 21.0% practice standards were judged to be Part Met. And there were no Not Met cases and just one case not applicable as the child was a baby.

Next 12 months.....

During the next 12 months the Independent Reviewing Officer service will sharpen its focus on a number of key areas to drive and improve 'quality of practice, plans and arrangements for looked after children and care leavers. For example we will::

- Effectively monitor plans that have been put in place for independent Reviewing Officers to retain oversight of cases Post 18 years where there is concerns about transition arrangements or the young person has complex needs.
- Further reduce variability and provide consistent and robust scrutiny of practice plans and arrangements for Looked After Children with a particular focus on permanency, care and pathway planning from 16yrs 3months.
- Produce MiCare reports that enable us to gain improved understanding of IRO visits to children in the six weeks prior to their review and improve reporting and understanding about why some children are not visited.
- Implement Mind of My Own (MOMO) offering more innovative ways for young people to contact workers and improve the voice and influence of children and young people in their reviews.
- Promote the engagement of parents and carers in LAC reviews.

Safeguarding and Improvement Unit Achievements in past year

We have been successful led by the DCS in creating a culture and climate within the local authority that values the Independent Reviewing Officer service and encourages and expects robust child-centred scrutiny; expects and is receptive to challenge.

We have a robust service development plan in place that drives continuous development and improvement.

A dispute resolution protocol is embedded that works effectively, from informal conversations to the escalation of cases to senior management and CAFCASS if necessary. We have started to strengthen our approach to partner escalations, this is a priority for 2017/2018.

Independent Reviewing Officers now:

- have improved professional status within the authority and the services is adequately resourced.
- increasingly better equipped with the right knowledge and skills that enable them to effectively scrutinise practice, plans and arrangements and know how and when to challenge.
- have open access to expert advice, including the provision of independent legal advice.
- demonstrate increasing evidence of practicing in a child-centred way and of their footprint on the child's case file.

Safeguarding and Improvement Unit Achievements in past year cont.

- We have strengthened relationships with CAFCASS, quarterly meetings are established and CAFCASS have joined service development days.
- Self-evaluation carried out with IRO's is more positive compared to November 2016 and demonstrates that IRO's now have a clearer understanding of their role and responsibilities and that they believe there is now a good culture and climate to deliver effective quality assurance.
- Supported IRO's to attend an Advanced Practice for Independent Reviewing Officers, HEA 4173 at Edgehill University.
- We hosted the Annual Northwest Regional IRO Conference, which was successful and raised our profile.
- Delivered Bright Spots 'Your life, your care' survey to looked after children 4yrs -18yrs in partnership with Coram Voice and the University of Bristol. And, have been successful in our bid to be a pilot authority for the Care Leavers survey.
- Started to align Looked After Child reviews are now aligned to Signs of Safety.
- We now have robust weekly and monthly Performance Information that assists us to drive continuous development and improvement. Weekly Performance Clinics are held.
- An IRO Annual Report 2016/2017 that evaluates practice, plans and arrangements for looked after children and the effectiveness of IRO service in ensuring the local authority as a corporate parent discharges its statutory responsibilities towards looked after children will be presented to the Corporate Parenting Panel in July 2017.

Questions

