

REPORT TO:	Corporate Parenting Board 23/05/2022
SUBJECT:	Independent Reviewing Officers Annual Report
LEAD OFFICER:	Róisín Madden; Director; Children's Social Care
CABINET MEMBER:	Councillor Maria Gatland
WARDS:	All
PUBLIC/EXEMPT:	Public

SUMMARY OF REPORT:

This is a brief updating report to the Corporate Parenting Panel re-align the annual reporting cycle for the IRO Service. This report is best read in conjunction with the IRO Report covering the period October 2021 – October 2022.

FINANCIAL IMPACT: None

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Corporate Parenting Panel is asked to note the report

The Contribution of Independent Reviewing Officers to Quality Assuring and Improving Services for Looked after Children.

This report is an analysis of the activity of the Independent Reviewing Officer Service and its effectiveness and impact on children's and young people's safety and care in Croydon between 31st October to 31st April 2022.

This is a brief updating report to the Corporate Parenting Panel re-align the annual reporting cycle for the IRO Service. This report is best read in conjunction with the IRO Report covering the period October 2021 – October 2022.

1. Introduction

The guidance states that:

This report should identify good practice but should also highlight issues for further development, including where urgent action is needed. It should refer to:

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- 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; and
- Whether any resource issues are putting at risk the delivery of a quality service to all looked after children.

The Independent Reviewing Service has a key role in assuring the quality of a Local Authority's care planning for looked after children and improving the overall quality of services offered.

2. Legal & Statutory Context of the IRO role

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 Independent Reviewing service operates within the framework of the IRO Handbook. This is statutory guidance issued to local authorities in 2010. The IRO has a key role in relation to the improvement and quality assurance of the Care Planning for Looked after Children and in challenging any drift and delay.

IROs have a responsibility to ensure that plans are timely, effective and achieve good outcomes for children and young people. They have a responsibility to promote best practice and high professional standards across the Children's Social Work Service.

IROs make an important contribution to the consistency of practice from all those who have a corporate responsibility for looked after children. They have a duty to prevent drift and delay in care planning and ensure that the Local Authority's efforts are focused on meeting the needs of children and achieving the best possible outcomes. IROs monitor the activity of the local authority as a corporate parent, in ensuring that appropriate actions are taken to meet the child's assessed needs, and that the Local Authority is operating in line with care planning regulations.

The IRO Service

2. Profile of Croydon IRO Service

The Independent Reviewing Service is sited within the Quality Assurance Service in Croydon and benefits from close links with the Child Protection Conference Chairs and the Local Authority Designated Officer.

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The service manager since February 2018 is Adam Fearon-Stanley, who also has responsibility for the Independent Visitor Service since August 2019 and continues to jointly monitor the Advocacy Service provided by Barnardo's.

After retirement of an IRO in 2021, our longest serving IRO is retiring at the end beginning of June 2022. In addition to existing underspend, this allows recruitment of 2 IRO to the service. There are 12 IRO currently in post.

All these services are migrating to the Quality, Commissioning and Practice Improvement Directorate. This aligns services purposed to quality assuring and developing practice for children across the local authority in one directorate. This will increase our ability to hold the mirror up to colleagues practice to achieve better outcomes for children and young people and strengthen the position from which to be curious, and whether required offer respectful and robust challenge. Strategically this is an opportunity to enhance the way in which children's voices inform practice, policy, and procedural development.

3. Caseloads and Children Looked After

The recommended average caseload as set by the IRO Handbook for an IRO is between 50 and 70 Children Looked After. During 2020 - 2021 the average IRO case hold has reduced to between 55 and 60 children. Part time IROs (3 days per week) case hold between 34 and 36. This continues to be the case.

The composition of the Children Looked After population continues to reduce, with numbers of local children looked after now in line with our statistical neighbours at approximately 509 children. A sustained decrease in Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children also continues to ensure that there is sufficient capacity within the IRO service.

As of April 21st, 2022, 533 children were looked after by the local authority, which continues the sustained downward trend described in the previous IRO Annual Report. The themes and practice analysed in the previous IRO Annual Report have not substantially.

There continues to be a focus on Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires with all children and ensuring that these are used to evaluate children's emotional and mental wellbeing with them.

4. Footprint of the IRO:

IROs convened 532 CLA Reviews October 2021 to April 2022. IROs carried out 306 Midway Reviews in the period 31st October 2021 to 31st April 2022. IROs collectively record an average of 200 case notes per month, capturing their work with children, families and colleagues.

I anticipate that our footprint will continue to change, as the number of children looked after reduces and we continue to evaluate how we record our interventions in summary and streamlined to demonstrate impact, not only tasks carried out. The number of case notes has decreased if midway reviews are used creatively to capture different strands

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of work in a short time-period for instance. Alternately midway reviews may increase for the same reasons. IRO are travelling more, hence balancing the number of meetings and monitoring activity they can undertake.

Our end of year reporting to the DFE for 2020 – 2021 shows that 95% of children had all of their CLA Reviews within time frame. Reporting to the DFE for 2021 to 2022 showed that 93% of children had all of their CLA Reviews in time frame.

CLA Reviews taking place in time frames are dependent on many factors. Some of these are outside of the IRO control most commonly where children and/or important family members and/or professionals are unable to attend on planned dates.

There is also a small number of CLA Reviews that are set outside of time frame where delay is considered purposeful with the agreement of the IRO Service Manager.

The performance indicator allows for this occurring in a proportion of children's meetings each year. To date (based on 1277 CLA Reviews per annum) this equates to 64 children not having an up-to-date review over the year.

Performance to date in the new year indicates that up to 26 children's meetings may occur outside of timescale in addition to the of 64 children's meetings that do not happen in time scale if the 95% performance indicator is not met.

Any child's meeting taking place outside of statutory time frames may impact on the outcomes for children and young people, it may be a missed opportunity for children and young people to contribute to their care plan, for networks to convene to understand the child's and young person's lived experience, for all to celebrate success and concerns or worries, and for the IRO to review the progress of children's care plans and identify delay to be addressed.

We therefore seek to minimise delay to CLA Reviews wherever we can, while also recognising that for these meetings to be purposeful for children and young people we accept that some meetings will be unavoidably late.

IRO are now travelling to carry out face to face visits and meetings with children that we began in July 2021 and increased through August and September 2021 before temporary lockdown in January 2022. While we rebalance our practice IRO Service Manager will continue to evaluate our recording, and this will be supported by the newly arriving IRO Manager as it is recognised that this is an area of performance that requires continual monitoring and improvement. The practice of meeting in parts, use of virtual platforms in addition to face-to-face meetings will also contribute to improved performance.

This work is supplemented by IRO performance indicators – CLA Review in timescale and participation of children in CLA Reviews now regularly reported on as an exception to the Executive Director and Practice Improvement Board.

Over the next 6 months there will be a renewed focus to explore the quality of our care plans for children and young people with children, social workers, and team managers. While there are many good and improving plans, IROs continue to face dilemmas

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when reviewing children's plans which they will raise with colleagues We anticipate this will be reflected in their footprint i.e., within the records of Review Meetings, Midway Reviews and case notes.

Our aspiration is that Care Plans for children will set out how a child's needs are met, in a way that recognises the child's lived experience of trauma, loss, or change. For our children's Care Plans to be co-produced and used with children and parents as dynamic documents which are timely and congruent with the child's court care plan which reflect changes in their life. To support social workers to reflect contingency planning, including parallel plans for permanence i.e., communicating the dynamic nature of planning for children where we are simultaneously assessing different permanency options.

This has been developed through team discussions, and quarterly cross service discussions with IRO, CP chair, Team Managers and Assistant Team Managers focusing on the meanings of plans, application in practice, and how we support one another to achieve both compliance – that they are completed in a timely way, and quality – that they are child and family led.

The service plan developed for the IRO Service will reflect the practice areas being focused on within children services – curiosity, fatherhood and supervision. IROs are currently discussing how we can use our position in the local authority, and the way in which we deliver children's meetings to tangibly contribute to practice development in in our own social work and in the social work of others.

5. Participation

Where children, parent, and carers feel heard, children's meetings and wider IRO involvement can be a platform for children and parents to understand children's care plans that is invaluable.

Our child participation in CLA Review's target is that 80% of children will participate in their CLA Review. This target will be increased to reflect the importance of children's participation being facilitated by IROs.

During the period April 2020 – April 2021 76% of children had participated in their CLA Review. This has continued to spike with variance as great as 86% of children participating in April 2021 for instance, and 72% in the following month. Year end participation of children was 77%

Conventional approaches to the child's looked after review as a single meeting to talk about children, where a child must be physically present throughout, may limit the ability of a child to participate. Conversely a CLA Review understood as a process where we speak with children and with others about children in a series of meetings increases the ways in which children can be included in their own meeting.

Practice experience during the Pandemic indicated that use of different platforms and co-ordinating smaller meetings with different participants increased children's inclusion, particularly teenagers. However, this was not reflected in the

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performance indicator that has remained consistently between 70% and 75% once we adjust for delay in recording i.e., IROs have 20 working days to record meetings which creates a lag of 1 month in accurate reporting. Performance Indicator as is, would suggest that 1 in 4 children do not take part in their meetings.

In September 2021, the definition of a CLA Review was elaborated as below

A CLA Review may be a single meeting or comprise several meetings with different participants. A child may attend some or all of these parts depending on their needs and vulnerabilities. Hence attendance relates to a child's participation in a process or may connote their physical presence in a single meeting.

Definition of the PN codes (how IRO record children and young people's participation) were also elaborated, to reflect the definition above and enable IRO to record children's participation congruent to practice.

Code	Definition	Examples
PN0	Child aged under 4 at time of Review	From 4th birthday child's views to be obtained and codes below used. Until then the child should be seen at Review by IRO if possible and this recorded as well as Code PN0
PN1	Child/young person attends virtually or physically to a whole or part of a meeting and speaks for him or herself Our current descriptor Child attended & spoke for self	Participation in the CLA Review process, where a child agrees with IRO how they will be included in the CLA Review process and which meetings they will attend and with whom. The child gives their own views in the meetings or parts they attend.
PN2	Child/young person attends virtually or physically to a whole or part of a meeting and an advocate speaks on his or her behalf Our current descriptor Child attended - advocate spoke	Child/young person attends as above but IRO or advocate expresses their views. An advocate is anyone the child/young person has consented to expressing their views on their behalf e.g., social worker, foster carer, Guardian, parent, friend, teacher etc. IRO must confirm that the child/young person's consent for advocate has been received and record this.
PN3	Child/young person attends virtually or physically and conveys his or her view symbolically (non-verbally) Our current descriptor Child attended - gave views nonverbally	Child/young person attends as above and uses nonverbal communication e.g., writing, sign language, drawings, Makaton This may be a more common method for some children/young people with Disabilities.
PN4	Child/young person attends virtually or physically but does not speak for him or herself, does not convey his or her views symbolically and does not ask an advocate to speak for him or her Our current descriptor Child attended without contributing	Attendance without contribution. Child/young person may attend but not express a view e.g., they may say nothing because they have special needs that make it difficult to understand what is being asked or difficult to communicate their views or they attend but do not wish to engage with the Review process. A child or young person must have been given a choice to attend or not. All children with disabilities regardless

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		of ability to participate in Review should be seen by IRO as part of Review Process if appropriate .
PN5	Child/young person does not attend but briefs an advocate to speak for him or her Our current descriptor Child not attended; advocate briefed with views	A child /young person may not be able to participate in the CLA Review process and should not be forced to do so. However, their views should be obtained. An advocate as defined in 2 above, can express Child/young person's views, with their consent . The views can be expressed to the advocate by any means - written on paper, email, or text, verbally in person, by phone, by audio /video/CD /viewpoint. Views (including 'nothing to say') expressed prior, during or after (within one month) Review Meeting are accepted. IRO will record the views and how expressed in Review Record or addendum to Record,
PN6	Child/young person does not attend but conveys his or her feelings to the Review by a facilitative medium Our current descriptor Child not attended & sent views	Child/young person expresses their views directly to Review, i.e., <u>not an IRO or advocate</u> but any other format - written, verbally, visually, symbolically as above either at or within 1 week of initial or 1 month or subsequent reviews of Review meeting.
PN7	Child/young person does not attend nor are his or her views conveyed in any way to Review Our current descriptor Child not attended & did not send views	E.g., situation where child / young person is missing, or where they been offered all or any of the above ways to convey views but do not respond or response is they do not wish to participate. However, if the child/young person's response is that they have no views to express or which they wish to have considered within the CLA Review process this should be coded under one of the above as appropriate.

This was distributed by email, discussed in team meeting, and referred to in monthly feedback to IRO about this performance indicator. The desired increase in reported participation had not occurred at last reporting which analysed December, January and February participation reporting for themes to inform actions.

Positively March participation reported at **82%** which is above performance target despite the year end culminating in **77%**

April participation currently reports at **77%** with 18 CLA Reviews to be recorded, this is 33% of all CLA Reviews this month, suggesting that when all recorded April participation could potentially report at performance target or above if IRO practice is consistent across March and April.

There will be co-ordinated work by IRO Service Manager and newly arriving IRO manager to sustain children's participation in their meetings

Dispute resolution and escalation

A significant aspect of IROs' work is focussed on continuing oversight and scrutiny of each child's care plan in between statutory reviews. For Croydon IROs, this part of the

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role is about good quality conversations and appropriate challenge between the IRO and others (e.g., child/ young person/ social worker/ parent/ carer/ school).

The Croydon Escalation and Resolution Process (CERP) shows that 54 CERPs have been raised by IROs in relation to 49 children in the year ending April 2022. This is a continuing reduction by almost a third in the number of CERPs raised in the previous reporting year. Previously this reduction was attributed to the impact of increased oversight of care planning through formal panels and an improved reflective culture at midway reviews where challenge to care planning is viewed as positive and helpful.

Robust auditing led by our Quality Assurance Consultants continue to support us to identify areas of strength and also learning. IRO activity, especially where challenging practice which has been found to be inadequate continues to be a focus area. This is particularly relevant where IRO elect to use Advocacy, Complaints or exhaustive discussions as opposed to formal escalation to exert influence in children's best interests.

The current format is not effective on children's recording system, requiring several different managers to potentially complete and send information back and forth which is a barrier. While the CERP protocol drew from practice in good and outstanding boroughs when drafted, in retrospect language used within it is shaming, and inculcates blame. Neither of which promote collegiate working or invites a positive response from colleagues.

The use of the CERP protocol, also hinges on the use of authority, the degree to which IRO are confident in using that authority when we are in dispute with social work teams requires further discussion not solely with the IRO Service, but also the wider practice system to understand how the use of authority by IRO is viewed, which in turn influences the responses of others to IRO and the confidence of IRO is executing this part of their role.

Where alerts have been raised by the IRO Service this has been for a wide range of reasons including:

- Drift and delay in securing permanency for a child
- The legal status of a placement, as S20, or as requiring regulation as a connected carers arrangement
- Querying the provision of services to a child to support their health, such as counselling or education, such as extra tuition through the Personal Education Plan, or their social relationships, such as contact or life story work
- A child not being visited, or required reports or care plans not being completed for the Child Looked after Review

Our challenge and scrutiny continue to be present outside of the CERP process and our increased IRO footprint evidences our high support and high challenge within a continuum of IRO activity.

The strength of our relationships with colleagues, enables our challenge to collaboratively and contributes to wider discussions in networks about the care planning.

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In our thematic audit, 'we found that as a service we continue to face dilemmas about when the threshold to raise a formal escalation is met. There is concern at whether these are effective ways of resolving practice issues for children and progressing children's care plans which is our highest context. This is particularly the case when the use of complaints, advocacy or informal discussion is achieving the same objectives. In this audit several issues were seen where a CERP would have been merited. This included a child not being visited in timescale and over a number of months, the repeated failure to enact previous review decision in the context of re-allocation of social workers and decision-making being made outside of the appropriate level of operational management'.

'IROs are intervening effectively on children's behalf on discrete care issues but continue to use informal means over and above formal escalation. This can obscure the impact that they have had to improve outcomes for children in care. This is also a measure of effective relationships with colleagues. These have been steadily improved over the last 2 years and accelerated by IROs' accessibility while working virtually'.

Given the above, the existing formal escalation process – CERPs – will be reviewed across Quality Assurance. Continuing discussion within the service tells us that IROs continue to wrestle with the dilemma's detailed. We wish to explore the development of an approach that privilege's collaborative working with colleagues and enables IROs to meet the expectation that they formally identify good practice and also drift and delay. The arrival of an IRO manager will give impetus to this work which will be co-ordinated with the Child Protection Chairs who also use CERPs and informed by dialogue with social work services.

6. Complaints and Compliments:

The Complaints leaflet revised in 2017-18 for children and young people is distributed by CLA admin to all children and carers who receive invites to Looked After Children Reviews. Given the time elapsed since revision it is necessary to refresh these documents for accessibility and accuracy.

Several IROs have empowered children to make complaints in this period and reflect that when these are responded to it can give the young person a strong sense of being heard and respected.

Where practice issues are raised informally, the IRO Service Manager addresses this, usually by bringing the professional network together, to explore our different perspectives and agree the best way forward.

The IRO Service Manager meets quarterly with the Children's Complaints Officer to highlight themes in complaints. They are also copied to the weekly Complaints bulletin.

We have been encouraging IROs to recognise and promote good practice where they see it. IROs praise both social workers practice with children and the quality of their written work and presentation. It is recognised by the IRO Service that alongside

challenge we need to continue to support our colleagues through recognising good work.

7. Advocacy:

Our Advocacy Service is currently provided by Barnardo's. This service also provides Advocacy to children who are subject to Child Protection Plans. Barnardo's have provided advocacy to 97 children looked after or care experienced young people (as of October 2021), and this reflects the average number of children, young people and care leavers open to their service at any one time. A range of issues have been addressed including:

- Quality of housing to care leavers
- Savings and entitlements predominantly care leavers
- Supporting children and young people in CLA Reviews, or to express their views about proposed changes in living arrangements that they do not agree to.

The IRO Service Manager has supported the Advocacy Service to further raise specific children and young people with senior managers where issues being pursued continue to be unresolved.

Barnardo's Advocacy Leaflet for children and young people is distributed by CLA admin to all children and carers who receive invites to Looked After Children Reviews.

There are quarterly meetings to plan and support promotion and referral to Advocacy directly to children, and to raise awareness in the social work teams.

Feedback (below) from the most recent quarterly report by Barnardo's was extremely positive and indicated that the Advocacy provided to children and young people in Croydon is continuing to strengthen, as are the key relationships between council officers that enable this.

Good News

- *This quarter we have seen timely responses to complaints.*
- *We have seen three long-standing housing cases resolved, and young families housed.*
- *After drawing the attention of the care leaving service to young people being blocked from receiving PA support on request, clear action has been taken and 5 young people have been assigned PAs.*
- *I would like to thank J- B this quarter as she has been extremely proactive in escalating the needs of young people who are facing homelessness and are rough sleeping.*
- *I would also like to thank LF who has been very patient and has proactively sought solutions for young people with housing issues or young people who have required PA support.*
- *Service manager, AF-S has also been extremely helpful in supporting difficult meetings with children looked after teams when managing complex situations requiring careful management and a joint response.*

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- *DD (CLA Service Manager) continues to be very positive about the advocacy service and always welcomes our involvement.*
- *A high number of cases were closed, 2/3 of which were successfully resolved.*

Conclusion:

The IRO Service in Croydon is adapting to practice where face to face working is not restricted by the Pandemic, and we are continuing to understand how our footprint is changing in this context.

The staffing profile of the service is changing as is our management structure, simultaneously the service is moving into a new directorate.

We continue to hold in mind learning that was explored in our previous Annual Report and this should be read in conjunction with that document

There remain areas of development as identified in the October 2021 – October 2022 Annual Report which have progressed in terms of plans, participation, and advocacy. Relaunching the CERP protocol or an equivalent approach has become more pressing, and our move to a new directorate is an opportunity to reset this and refresh material that supports children's complaints.

I am confident that the changes the service face are an exciting opportunity to grapple with these in a different way and with renewed energy for children and young people.

Author: Adam Fearon-Stanley (IRO Service Manager)

Report agreed:

Dawn West (Acting HOS Safeguarding & QA)

1. CONSULTATION

N/A

2. LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

N/A

3. HUMAN RESOURCES IMPACT

N/A

4. EQUALITIES IMPACT

N/A

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5 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

N/A

6 CRIME AND DISORDER REDUCTION IMPACT

N/A

7 DATA PROTECTION IMPLICATIONS

7.1 WILL THE SUBJECT OF THE REPORT INVOLVE THE PROCESSING OF 'PERSONAL DATA'?

NO

8 Approved by: Róisín Madden Director Children's Social Care

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