
Children's Services Scrutiny Committee – 11th November 2020

Report of the Acting Director of Children's Services

Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report 1st April 2019 to 31st March 2020

Purpose

1. The role and function of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) is set within the framework of the IRO Handbook 2010, and linked to Care Planning Regulations and Guidance, which were introduced in April 2011. The IRO has a key role in relation to the improvement of care planning for Children in Care and for challenging any drift and delay. The IRO Handbook (Section 7.11) sets out the requirements to produce an annual report for the scrutiny of the Members of the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee. The IRO annual report sets out and meets these requirements and serves to ensure the Committee are assisted to understand the quality of practice and experiences of Children in Care.

The report is being shared with the Scrutiny Committee to assure the Committee of the effective functioning of the Safeguarding and Review Service, which has operational line management of IROs, for children subject to Child Protection plans and effective care planning for Children in Care (CIC).

Recommendations

2. It is recommended that: -
 - The Committee note and comment on the content of this report.

Background

3. This is the IRO Annual Report 1st April 2019 to 31st March 2020.
4. The Annual Report demonstrates progress with regard to children who are looked after and their participation in their meetings and service development. The completion of the CIC survey in December 2019 and the joint event with the Children in Care Council in February 2020 demonstrated strengths in this area of

service activity during this year and evidences a strong commitment to working in partnership with and ensuring children have a voice in service development. The service seeks to capitalise and build on this work, and plans to develop several working groups, to further strengthen participation across the service with a range of stakeholders.

5. The IRO Handbook outlines the duty upon IROs “to review the child’s care plan and progress between formal reviews”. In Dudley, there is a standardised approach to undertaking Progress Reviews to ensure progress takes place for all children and young people allocated within the Safeguarding & Review Service. This model of practice is unique to Dudley and is evidenced by audits to play a role in effective oversight by the IRO in children’s lives, to ensure their plans are being progressed. Having said this, during the reporting cycle there was no way to measure whether a Progress Review had taken place.
6. This year has seen an increase in IRO challenge as evidenced by the increase in the number of dispute resolutions raised. The aim of this dispute resolution process (DRP) is to improve progress of plans for our Children in Care, and our children subject to Child Protection plans. Dudley has a formal process in place for the IRO to raise concerns, and to ensure this is brought to the attention of the most appropriate manager. This year has seen a continued increase in challenges made from the IROs. The high number of informal disputes is a strong indication that issues raised are addressed and resolved, before having to initiate the formal process. The report outlines further detail with regard to the reasons for informal and formal DRPs, with the main reason being the Care / Pathway Plan not completed/updated for informal disputes, and Child Protection plans not progressed for formal disputes.
7. The Annual Report highlights a number of areas of practice where the Service needs to develop. This includes strengthening the voice of children who are subject to Initial Child Protection Conferences and Child Protection planning. There has been no service data collected or feedback obtained from children or their parents involved in Child Protection planning during this reporting period, and this is a significant disadvantage to understanding children and their family’s experiences during a time of crisis, and is required to inform service development. The numbers of children accessing advocacy services and independent visiting is also poor, and requires significant investment from social workers and IROs, to improve children’s access to these services and the voice and opportunities this gives children.
8. The performance data also highlights that the Service are not meeting its targets for the timescales in which key meetings across the Service (Initial Child Protection Conferences (ICPC’s) Review Child Protection Conferences (RCPC’s), or Children in Care Reviews). This is in part due to ambitious target setting. However, there are key areas where action can be taken to improve timeliness. This includes challenging individual social work teams where there has been late notification of a change in the child’s circumstances, and where the social work report has not been submitted within the required timescales.

A number of Service Objectives for 2020/2021 are outlined in order to build upon strengths and address areas of weakness.

Finance

9. There are no cost implications arising from this report.

Law

10. There are no legal implications arising from this report.

Equality Impact

11. IROs and Social workers provide support to the whole community including a range of diverse groups. Good quality practice will be more attuned to the equality issues experienced by individuals, families and communities. Effective IRO oversight and challenge will assist with the development of high-quality social work practice.
12. The annual report outlines where children and young people have been consulted with and future plans in this area.

Human Resources/Organisational Development

13. There are no organisational development/HR implications arising from this report. The development work around Dispute Resolution and Participation can be managed within the current resource.

Commercial/Procurement

14. There are no Commercial/Procurement implications arising from this report.

Health, Wellbeing and Safety

15. Good social work practice will support the health and wellbeing of children young people and families who access services. In addition, a positive organisational learning culture reduces staff burn out and sickness levels and increases general and emotional wellbeing.



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Appendices

1 – IRO Annual Report 1st April 2019 to 31st March 2020