



Family Services

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Introduction

An annual report of the Independent Reviewing Service for looked after children is required in accordance with the Children and Young Persons Act 2008, and statutory guidance published in the Independent Reviewing Officer's (IRO) Handbook (published by the department for Children, Schools, and Families 2010.)

The report provides a summary of the service activity and delivery by the IRO Service in Barnet for the period 1st April 2022 to 31st March 2023

Service Delivery

The Independent Reviewing Service is managed within the Safeguarding, Quality Assurance and Workforce Development Service to ensure that the Independent Reviewing Officers' (IRO's) input and contribution to social work practice and care planning for children and young people is distinct from case holding service areas. The Head of Service has a direct line of accountability to the Executive Director of Children's Services: they meet regularly to review any practice concerns independently.

IROs' play an important role in ensuring that the local authority fulfils its responsibilities as Corporate Parent for the children it looks after by ensuring that they receive a good service that meets their range of needs and are provided with safe, stable care that enables them to flourish and achieve. IROs' provide quality assurance of children and young peoples' care plans by monitoring the effectiveness and progress of care planning, alongside, providing challenge to the professional systems responsible for supporting children and young people in care as necessary.

The IRO's core functions, tasks and responsibilities are set in statutory guidance within the Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations Volume 2: care planning, placement, and case review (June 2015) and, the IRO Handbook: Statutory Guidance for Independent Reviewing Officers and local authorities which sets out their functions in relation to case management and review for Looked After Children (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010).

The role of the IRO is to improve care planning and secure better outcomes for Looked After Children. They do this by chairing the child's reviews and monitoring the child's case on an ongoing basis with particular attention to:

- Monitor the performance by the local authority of their functions in relation to the child's case.
- Alert senior managers of identified areas of poor practice or patterns of concern.
- Recognise and report on good practice
- Participate in any review of the child's case.
- Promote the voice of the child and ensure that any ascertained wishes and feelings of the child concerning the case are given due consideration by the appropriate authority.
- Ensure the care plan for the child is informed by an up-to-date assessment and fully reflects the child's current needs and that actions are set out in the plan are consistent with the local authority's legal responsibilities towards the child.

- Prevent drift in care planning and delivery of services to children
- Make sure that children's care plans given proper consideration and weight to their wishes and feelings, and that they understand the implications of any changes made to his/her care plan.
- Ensure children understand how an advocate can help

Statutory Guidance recommends that IROs hold caseloads of between 50 to 70 Looked After Children, to deliver a good quality of service that includes the full range of functions set out in the IRO handbook. Caseloads need to be managed effectively to allow for midway review tracking responsibilities, placements Out of Borough, large sibling groups, disability, unaccompanied asylum seekers (UASC) and complexity of individual cases. To ensure capacity for our IRO's to provide high quality services caseloads have remained within statutory guidelines at an average of 60-65 cases per permanent IRO and an agreed maximum of 35 cases per contracted IRO.

Service Structure

The IRO Team in Barnet is comprised of four permanent full-time Independent Reviewing Officers and one Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer (FIRO) who chairs annual foster carer reviews who are supervised by the Principal Independent Reviewing Officer. The FIRO reports to the fostering service and does not review any review any cases held under the IRO function.

In addition to the permanent IRO's, there are currently four IRO's working via our contracted provider, Aidhour, and one freelance IRO (undertaking cases for Barnet for many years) who provide additional support as and when required. Contract meetings take place quarterly and well are attended by the Operations Managers of Aidhour, the Head of Safeguarding and the Principal IRO. Agenda items focus on the key performance indicator, integration, service development and information sharing.

We are using the flexibility of the contract to provide cover for a permanent IRO position that has not been successfully recruited to yet (a long-term IRO was redeployed to a Quality Assurance role due to significant ill-health). Another permanent role was filled with an internal appointment when another long-term IRO left to pursue an alternative career. These two changes in permanent staffing meant a change in IRO for approximately one third of looked after children who had previously enjoyed consistency in their IROs for a number of years. This has been managed as sensitively as possible for children and young people.

Administrative support to the IRO Service is provided by the Conference and Review Manager with additional part time support from a dedicated Conference and Review Administrator.

Annual Performance 2022-23

For the 357 children that were in care in the reporting period 2022/23; the data and performance indicators show:

- 97.9% of Children in Care Reviews were held within statutory timescales.
- 95.7% of children and young people participated in their Children in Care reviews.

The performance of reviews held within statutory timescales is a 2% increase from 2021/22 (95.6%). This can be attributed, in part, to utilising a degree of flexibility afforded by the reviewing process. A small number of reviews were held in two parts or were held virtually to accommodate occasional late notifications of children becoming looked after, change of placement requiring an initial review, IRO availability, or illness.

Participation is recorded as children who have attended the review meeting and spoken for themselves or contributed to the review process by means of a consultation form, observation in the case of a very young child by the IRO, having their views presented by an advocate or interpreter, or a direct conversation with their social worker or IRO.

There was a slight 0.2% increase in child participation (from 95.5%). The small number of children who do not wish to participate in their reviews are encouraged to do so and their views are captured separately if they feel unable to attend.

The highest number of children in care in the reporting period 2022/23 reflects numbers in 2021/22 which was 357. In the last quarter reporting period this number has reduced to 347 – this is a small increase on the average figure (338) reported in the 2021/22 annual report.

The rise in the number of children looked after resulted in a temporary increase in the caseloads of both the permanent IRO's and the commissioned IRO's. Currently caseloads are operating at the annual average reflected in the 2021/22 reporting year.

Focus on Care Planning

Ensure the care plan for the child is informed by an up-to-date assessment and fully reflects the child's current needs and that actions are set out in the plan are consistent with the local authority's legal responsibilities towards the child.

- All About Me/Assessment and Care plan is mostly (80-85%) updated with a child's current needs and available for the IRO prior to each review. Discussions between the IRO and the social work team take place prior to the review to ensure the information sharing is up-to-date and the IRO is aware of any developments in the child's circumstances. Performance, audit data and tracking and quality assurance activity reflect the positive efforts being made by social work practitioners to ensure All About Me assessments are updated before reviews.

-All About Me assessment/care plans require the voice of the child to be evidenced throughout their care planning, alongside updating any change in circumstances and the child's needs. The IRO service notes that children and young people's plans mostly reflect current needs and that the participation and contribution of young people in their care/pathway plans is clear and well evidenced.

- Where needed, IRO's provide challenge which is generally well received and responded to by social work teams. Challenge is respectful, clear, and consistent and is evidenced in discussions which are recorded on case files, emails, and virtual meetings with the social work teams and where necessary, in escalation reports.

Alert senior managers of identified areas of poor practice or patterns of concern and recognise and report on good practice.

-Where there is the need for formal escalation, this is tracked, and monitored by the Principal Reviewing Officer and where necessary, escalated to Heads of Service.

- The increased communication and consultation between the IRO's and social work teams in this reporting period has continued. However, there has been a slight increase in practice alerts and formal escalations relating to care planning and a decrease in escalations relating to processes.

-In the reporting period there were 12 formal escalations. Of those escalations (5) were related to processes, i.e., care plans not being updated by the social workers, preventing IRO's from completing planning outcomes on LCS. The remaining escalations (7) were in relation to social work practice and planning with a notable increase in formal escalations up to senior management level; from zero (0) cases during the previous reporting period to five (5) cases.

However, most practice alerts and formal escalations when raised, are swiftly addressed although and there has been renewed focus by IROs to ensure any unresolved escalations are responded to in a timely way.

Of the cases escalated: -

- One was a sibling group of two, where a placement agreement meeting, and a statutory visit had not taken place prior to the initial review and where the carer had failed to register the children with health services local to the placement.

- One escalation was in respect of another sibling group of two whereby the review needed to be rescheduled due to the social worker not providing an updated assessment/care plan.

-One escalation in relation to a sibling group of two was due to the cancellation of a joint CP/CiC review on three occasions by the social work team as they were unclear about the legal status of the children. A joint review is chaired by either the CRO or IRO to end the CP status of a child has become Looked After. This case was escalated to AHoS level but the delay in resolving the issue resulted in a three-month delay in the joint review taking place.

-One escalation was due the IRO's concerns about a proposed final care plan written without the social work team having sight of the SGO assessment nor the social work team seeking the views of the IRO.

-In one case up-to-date care plan/All About Me had not been had not been updated on LCS for over a year. CiC reviews were taking place with the social work team providing a verbal update to the IRO prior to each review. This meant the CiC meeting outcomes could not be completed by the IRO following each review and the up-to-date care plan was not recorded on the case file.

-The other two cases are a sibling group of two where the CP plan was ended through a joint review chaired by a Conference Reviewing Officer (CRO), but an up-to-date plan to end the CP process had not been recorded, preventing the CRO from completing the CiC outcomes from the joint review. This meant an up-to-date care plan was not recorded on the case file for over one year.

Also, an audit of CIC cases by a new team manager identified three cases where the CIC workflow was significantly behind and the allocated IRO's had failed to escalate these concerns, and this was addressed with the IRO.

Where there is care planning that is contrary to the wishes and feelings of the child, there is evidence of IRO's challenging and ensuring children and young people's voices are well represented.

The Principal Reviewing Officer provides focused feedback and support to ensure that IRO's provide appropriate, respectful challenge to professionals when care plans are not sufficiently addressing or progressing the support children need to achieve good outcomes.

Additionally, the IRO service is focused on preventing drift in care planning and delivery of services. Examples of this can be evidenced and include IRO's challenging what they consider to be unsuitable placement arrangements to achieve stability and security for children who require long term placements and permanency.

Overall, the continued collaboration between the IRO service and the social work teams ensures most care plans are updated in a timely manner which supports the progression of plans and positive outcomes for children. Joint working is well established and IRO's are routinely invited to permanency planning meetings, professional meetings, the Vulnerable Adolescents at Risk Panel and Child Exploitation and Missing planning meetings.

A focus on strengthening the working relationship between the IRO's and social work teams in the Assessment, Intervention & Planning Service (AIP) has been undertaken due to changes in staff in both services. Linked IRO's to the AIP service need to establish relationships with newly appointed managers in the service. The Principal IRO is mindful of how the support provided by link IRO's to this service area has been inconsistent due to the use of Aidhour and newly appointed agency workers pending the recruitment of permanent IROs.

Child Participation

Promoting the voice of the child and ensure that any ascertained wishes and feelings of the child concerning the case are given due consideration by the appropriate authority.

This reporting year has seen a slight increase in children attending and/or participating in their reviews. The IRO service has resumed face to face reviews. Most children and young people welcomed this, but a small number of older children stated they preferred virtual reviews over face-to face reviews. For babies and very young children the quality of observations by their IRO, their placements and care arrangements were greatly improved with physical reviews.

Hybrid and virtual reviews are used flexibly where there is a need to schedule an urgent initial review due to late notifications, and the option of a virtual review or a two-part review is utilised to keep the review within timescale.

A priority for the IRO service was to continue to develop and embed our child participation model (bi-annual events) and resume age-appropriate activities in the community, chosen by them. A Go Ape ziplining event, followed by lunch, for children aged 12-17 years took place in April 2022 during Easter break. In April 2023 six children and young people went trampolining and for a meal with their respective IRO's. A further event was planned to take place during the October half term but was cancelled as the planned event clashed with activities planned by Barnet on Point (BOP), Barnet's Senior Children in Care Council.

Completion of the review consultation booklet with children and young people has not been routinely completed by children for their reviews and feedback indicates that professionals (carers and practitioners) are not using this tool. Refreshed information and ways to share information will be the focus of events going forward and co-produced with children and practitioners. However, children's verbal feedback and views are being obtained outside of and during reviews and is recorded and appropriately responded to at every opportunity.

The personalised record of review written to children in letter form has been embedded since December 2020 and feedback of this format written in child friendly, age-appropriate language and personalised content continues to receive positive feedback from both service users and partner agencies.

Review Meetings: child centred practice.

The IRO Handbook states, 'for many older children and young people, particularly plan for independence that it is hoped the IRO will hand over at least part of the chairing role to them so that they can take an increased ownership of the meeting.' Many of our young people have told us they do not feel they want to chair their reviews as it can be a challenging process. We are working to encourage an enhanced level of ownership and participation for our children and young people by sharing invitational tools with them, i.e., an invitational letter with tips and advice from our BOP children for other children and young people and voice notes.

Also, skill-based workshops for children to increase confidence and communication will take place during the summer break which will be co-facilitated by other young people in BOP.

Ensure children understand how an advocate can help.

The IRO service, alongside the social work practitioners, explain the advocate role and the role of the independent visitor to children and young people. The matter is routinely raised and recorded in the record of review by most IROs. We are supporting some IROs to routinely offer this service again even if it has been declined at previous opportunities. Feedback during reviews from children and young people who have an advocate or independent visitor, is generally positive about their experience of advocacy.

IRO Footprint

Monitor the performance by the local authority of their functions in relation to the child's case.

The Principal IRO is assured there is clear evidence of IRO oversight on children's records by regular review of cases, particularly those where there has been uncertainty regarding a child or young person's CLA status and/or a discussion between the IRO and Principal IRO has taken place, to ensure the IRO's are appropriately recording their views and concerns, ensuring the IROs footprint is clearly visible on case files.

IRO's provide appropriate challenge and escalate concerns where necessary, which contributes to robust and timely planning for children. Statutory reviews are taking place regularly and within timescale. Midway reviews are routinely scheduled at statutory reviews but need to be more consistently taking place and recorded on children's files. This includes any discussions involving the IRO and social worker.

The Principal IRO attends the weekly Permanence Tracker Meeting, and Permanency Planning Panel. This enables the IRO service to contribute to planning, provide positive feedback and/or raise concerns about progression of permanency for the children and young people who are discussed.

2022/23 Priorities

1. Child Participation

-A key priority for the year ahead is for young people to be supported to participate in their reviews however they feel comfortable, to feel empowered and hold professionals to account for their actions in the care planning process. We will be encouraging children and young people to facilitate/lead the reviewing of their plans in reviews.

-To increase number at participation event by providing more individual opportunities and age appropriate activities and linking more closely with the Participation Leads and Service Development Officer to use child and parent feedback to help improve how reviewing services are offered.

- To ensure consistency at each review, that the invitation and explanation of the role and benefits of having an advocate and/or independent visitor at. This aims to increase and encourage more young people to take up the offer of an advocate.

2. IRO Practice Development

-A key priority for the Principal Independent Reviewing Officer will be increased oversight over the midway review process to ensure these are taking place routinely and recorded on case files.

-To ensure that all IROs continue to develop their capacity to drive high quality care planning activity and to monitor the effectiveness of children's plans by providing respectful and robust challenge to professionals when plans are not achieving

-The IRO's are being supported to achieve these aims through both formal and informal supervision and group supervision. Safeguarding training provided for the workforce is attended by the IRO's to keep practice up to date.

-To ensure practice alerts are raised routinely where there are concerns about the reviewing process, and where necessary escalated to the Principal IRO in accordance with the Safeguarding and Escalation Protocol to prevent drift in the reviewing process.

- To work with the Workforce Development Team to source training specific to the role of the IRO from external providers. Knowledge gained from training days will be shared across the IRO service and wider service where relevant.

-The Principal Reviewing Officer will continue to support the IRO's practice through performance data, quality assuring the IRO's case recording and the letters of review and live observation of the IRO's chairing reviews to give feedback and support learning.

-Data is used to support management oversight and the development of the IRO service. This includes individual performance data and the monitoring of statutory 6 requirements i.e., timescales of decisions and minutes to prevent practice falling below expected standards.

3. IRO Workshops

-CIC workshops facilitated by IROs' resumed during this reporting period. The workshops focus on children in care processes and care planning with an emphasis of the timescales, expectations, and process for the All About Me assessments and plans. The workshops are advertised on the Learning POD and there was additional promotion on FS News but uptake was low. A workshop scheduled for 19.10.22 was cancelled due to having only one attendee express interest and another workshop scheduled to take place on 8.2.23 was cancelled.

Workshops will be reviewed, and feedback sought from practitioners to develop the workshop material into a webinar and to enable the workshop to be delivered at team meetings. We will invite young people to help develop our webinar.

Conclusion

Communication and consultation between IRO's, social work teams and partner agencies continues to contribute to robust care planning and outcomes for children and young people.

The IRO footprint is evident in cases on the system: challenge is recorded but midway tracking needs to improve. Mostly, challenge to drive improvements in care planning for children is positively received but there has been a need for practice alerts and formal escalations to be escalated to senior management unlike in previous reporting year. The delivery of IRO workshops will be reviewed to provide insight into the role and expectations of the IRO service at team meetings

The key focus for the IRO's is to promote participation opportunities to develop their relationships with their children and young people and promote their confidence to chair their reviews. Refreshed consultation processes will be co-produced and practice development specific to the role of the IRO, training, child participation, and using service user feedback to shape service delivery will be the key priorities for 2022/23.