

Fit for the future; Right children, Right place, Right time, Right amount of time

**A Summary of the Independent Reviewing Officer
Annual report 2018/19**

Purpose

This report provides a summary of the Annual Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) report concentrating specifically on 'the difference the IRO service has made' in this reporting period.

Over the last year the Service has focused on improving Care Planning and the Participation of children in their reviews.

At the end of this reporting period we had 615 looked after children with more children having been discharged during this reporting period than in the previous year. There has been a strong focus on achieving permanence with the right children discharged from our care due to adoption, Special Guardianship Orders, revocation of Care Orders and children returning home.

Keeping children close is an improving picture, which is pleasing because care plans are better managed and children can retain more of their cultural and community identity.

We have strengthened our expectations regarding ensuring each child has an updated care plan before each review with a 'no care plan, no review' stance. This has been strengthened to promote good care planning. We also now receive notification of any child without a permanency plan by their second review, (4 months) and can therefore follow up on this. It is pleasing to note that these numbers are very low.

The number of children chairing their review, attending and completing documents has increased; when they attend and participate, there is a richness and context and the language is meaningful. Regional colleagues still have more children attending their review and this is what Walsall aspires to. A positive change is that reports are now written as a letter, in the first person, directly to the child. This makes for a more personal and meaningful document and reinforces that the child is the most important person. The feedback from children, parents and professionals is extremely positive and is helping to increase the engagement of children. The IRO's work with children to make sure they know what the child wants discussing at their review, who they want present and where they want the review to take place. To support this, all the IRO's have done the direct work training and have a specific toolkit for direct work.

Children are made aware of their rights at their reviews, including the advocacy service and the compliments and complaints procedure. These provide alternative ways for children's voices to be heard if they do not feel they are being listened to.

IROs are regularly recording their contact with children, with significant improvement in this area. IROs are capturing this routinely, increasing their visibility and footprint on the child's file. File audits evidence this.

Feedback from children completing the 'tell me about your IRO' included children saying they felt safe, listened to and having decisions and recommendations explained to them. They would like us to explain why we cannot do some things and always use words they understand

Restorative Approach

The service continues to embed the restorative approach and has followed a high support, high challenge model to support this. High support has included the production of a Good Practice report identifying exceptional social work practice, and this included the following exercise carried out jointly between the IRO service and the social work teams to embed better preparation for Looked After Children Reviews. This led to more pre-review consultation work and greater engagement with children.

The Service continues to use the Resolution process to challenge practice and make a positive difference for children. This year saw 278 resolutions raised, 160 informal and 118 formal compared to 123 last year.

Staffing Compliment

In Walsall, the IRO's do a dual role as child protection conference chairs as well as reviewing officers. Undertaking both roles does have some advantages. Children and families receive greater continuity and do not have to keep repeating their story. The IRO is often the most consistent professional in the child's life and often they can provide an overview of the child's circumstances, which a new social worker finds helpful.

There is a reasonable level of cultural diversity within the service, but it is not representative of the makeup of the looked after children. The service has seen some changes of staff and each new member of staff, be they agency or permanent, receives a good induction. The service prides itself on supporting new staff into the role and service, working well as a team; team members are supportive of each other. Supervision is monthly, and always takes place, and informal consultation is always available. Each member of staff is a highly experienced social work practitioner with different experiences and knowledge.

All children looked after receive a card with a photo of their IRO and a few brief details about their role. As part of the 'WR4C Big conversation', children were asked what they would change if they were the director of children's services. Children told us that staff expect them to share lots of information about themselves but do not share anything about themselves. In response, the IRO introductory cards will now contain a brief comment about the IRO to help develop the relationship.

Workloads

Workloads have averaged at 99 children for each IRO, which is high. The IRO Handbook recommends a workload of between 50 and 70 children. The regional average for a dual role was 85. High workloads impacts on visiting children, consulting with social workers prior to a looked after review (which we know yields positive results) and mid-way checks, which can identify when a child's needs not being met or there are issues of drift and delay.

Clearly, the Quality Assurance aspect to the role is strengthened when workloads are reduced and the IRO'S can complete visits, consultations with social workers and mid-way checks.

Annual work programme for next year April 2019 – March 2020

What we will do:

- When we have the service dashboard we will report on the numbers of mid-way checks that take place and the difference they make for children.
- We will report on the numbers of consultations between IRO's and Social Workers 15 days prior to the child's review and the impact this has on the child's engagement in their review.
- We will engage children more effectively by doing invite letters for their review from the child.
- We will create more purposeful engagement with parents so that they have opportunities to remain in their child's life. When necessary we will manage any associated risks.
- We will continue to work with the participation officer to be better informed and look at alternatives to engaging children in the looked after process.
- We will report on the numbers of consultations between IRO's and Social Workers 15 days prior to the child's review and the impact this has on the child's engagement in their review.
- We will work alongside our legal representatives to ensure we have independent legal advice as required and that the views of the IRO are captured clearly in the reports for court
- We will continue to work effectively with our performance colleagues so that we have intelligence, know ourselves well and know how to shape our plans for improved development
- We will form a task group to develop outcome-based plans
- We will work with colleagues to align children's plans so that they have one plan
- We will add a few sentences to our IRO cards so that they are more personable. We know from the transformation work with children that this is something they want.
- Each member of staff will receive an observation with feedback of them facilitating a looked after review

Debra Silvester Group Manager

21st October 2019