

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

7 JANUARY 2021

ATTENDANCE OF THE PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR ADULTS' SERVICES

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Summary

This report details the area covered by the Portfolio Holder for Adults' Services that falls within the remit of this Committee and updates the Committee on activity in relation to the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) team, which has responsibility for the chairing of statutory reviews of Looked After Children. This team is part of the wider Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Service. This report provides quantitative and qualitative evidence relating to the IRO team in Medway as required by statutory guidance.

1. Background

- 1.1 The areas within the terms of reference of this Overview and Scrutiny Committee and covered by the Portfolio Holder for Adults' Services, according to the Council's constitution is:
 - Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO)
- 1.2 Over the past year it has been important to embed and stabilise the improvements made in the previous year in relation to compliance with statutory duties. These improvements were in relation to timeliness of LAC reviews, mid-way monitoring from IRO's, dispute resolution processes and ensuring children and young people were at the very centre of any care planning process.
- 1.3 This year we have successfully recruited to a fully staffed and permanent IRO team. IROs continue to retain an independent role with looked after children whilst working closely with social workers and partner agencies to promote positive care planning and permanency for children.

2. Demand

- 2.1 During 2019 the demand on the Independent Reviewing Officer has remained relatively stable whereas there has been a bigger rise in Child Protection which we are now seeing coming down.

The table below illustrates:

Year	Number of Looked After Children
2019/20	426
2018/19	425
November 2020	451

- 2.2 There has been a marginal increase of looked after children since the last reporting period and the stability of these figures might suggest that the right children and young people are coming into care. There has been a more significant rise in the number of children since the start of the Pandemic and we are tracking this cohort of children and young people separately.

3. Performance

Performance Indicator	November 2019	November 2020
Average IRO Caseload	68	55
Highest IRO Caseload	70	71
% of LAC with all reviews in timescale within the last 12 months	79%	94%
% LAC reviews in period completed within timescale	90%	99%
Total number of reviews completed	1163	896 (Apr-Nov '20)

4. Average IRO Caseloads

- 4.1 The team has been working with a staff composition of 7.2 FTE IRO's, which includes 1 Fostering IRO. The IRO team has had permanent IRO's since July 2019. We have benefited from an additional IRO post from April 2020 as part of the realignment of Children's Services. This has brought the average case load for the team down and in line with the recommended national IRO case load 50-70 as reflected above and allows IROs to carry out both statutory and secondary functions within the IRO role as part of the wider Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Service.
- 4.2 The IRO team is managed by the Operational Independent Reviewing Officer Manager who was a permanent member of staff (left in November 2020 but immediately recruited to a further permanent and experienced IRO Manager commencing in February 2021). The majority of the IRO's within the team

have been employed within the service for over 12 months and in terms of diversity, the profile of the service reflects the looked after child population. The team is all permanent.

5. Timescales

5.1 Child in Care reviews need to be held under statutory timescales as follows:

- Within 20 days of entering care
- Within 3 months of Initial Review
- A minimum of 6 monthly thereafter

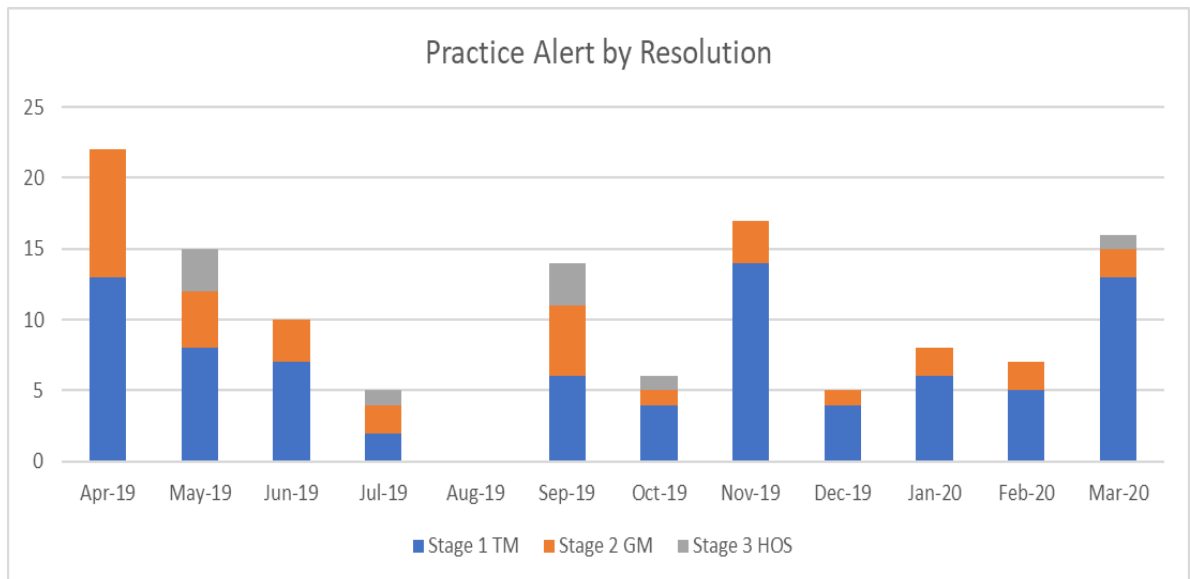
5.2 Furthermore, a Child in Care review must be considered following a placement move or if a change of care plan is being considered, a care plan cannot alter without the IRO agreeing to this, ideally within the review. Within this reporting year timeliness of Child in Care reviews has fluctuated from 96% in April 2019 to 94% in March 2020. Some of the reasons are late notifications, which impact on the figures for the year, and there has been staff sickness within the team which has significantly impacted IRO availability (now resolved). It is envisaged this will improve over the year 2020-21 as work is undertaken across the wider Children's Services in ensuring that the IRO team is alerted at an early stage to children coming into care via one portal. We are noticing this improvement.

6. Dispute Resolution Notices (DRs)

6.1 It is an expectation and a statutory duty that IRO's will raise a Dispute Resolution Notice in relation to any matter, which will negatively impact on a child's wellbeing, safety, or permanence.

6.2 Initially, this incorporates an informal alert raised with the worker and Group manager to resolve this issue. It is only if the IRO is not satisfied with the response or if the agreements are not acted upon that this will be raised as a formal Dispute Resolution Notice. There are clear timescales for expected responses from managers before this is either resolved or escalated further to Group managers, Head of Service, Deputy Director and, ultimately, Cafcass.

6.3 The IRO Team Manager reports the numbers and themes of Dispute Resolution Notices monthly to managers from Children's Services. Overall, Dispute Resolution Notices are well received within the Local Authority, most are resolved at Team or Group manager level. When it has been necessary to raise these to Heads of Service, as a Dispute Resolution the response has been efficient, child focussed, and resolution has been achieved. As a result of these responses, it has not been necessary to escalate disputes to Cafcass.



- 6.4 As noted above the IRO's continue to focus upon practice within the service; the highest number of Dispute Resolution Notices were raised in relation to poor quality or missing care plans, 37% and 22% being raised in relation to drift in securing permanence for children and young people in care. IRO's continues to raise escalation where it involves services that do not fall within the remit of Children Services via the Medway Safeguarding Children Partnership (MSCP) using the Dispute Resolution Notice.
- 6.5 In addition to raising issues of delay or inadequate practice for children in care, the IRO team also have a duty to provide positive feedback to Children's Services as stipulated in the IRO Handbook. Evidence of positive feedback was collated throughout the reporting year being circulated across Children's Services, the Medway Virtual School, IRO service and Provider services.
- 6.6 There is a culture of expectation in that managers want to know when there are issues. The Dispute Resolution process is an effective mechanism for IROs to provide support and challenge. It provides a good opportunity to build our relationships and credibility within the SW teams and to drive the improvements needed to make a positive impact on children's lives.
- 6.7 The joint CP Chair and IRO Escalation policy has now been updated. The Dispute Resolution process will be built into Mosaic and will be reported monthly.

7. Participation and Engagement

- 7.1 As of April 2020, there were 51 Mind of My Own statements received, the fall of numbers has been due to change of social work staff and the lack of children using the App. Children and young people use Mind Of My Own as one of the communication tools to communicate with their workers regarding a variety of topics including preparing for a meeting (Child in Care review), reporting a problem, requesting a change or sharing good news.

- 7.2 However, to address this there has been a redraft plan of Mind of My Own and it is now lead strategically by the Head of Service for Corporate Parenting with the IRO Manager and an IRO in the team leading on the operational aspect of it. We also have the Young Lives Foundation apprentice as a Champion across the whole of Children's Services, with a number of champions across our workforce who have completed a train the trainer initiative and are on hand for workers and children who may need support.
- 7.3 Mind Of My Own Express was launched in September 2019 as a result of joint funding from Provider Services, SEND and CCG, to enable younger children and those with communication difficulties to use the App to share their views regarding the services they receive.
- 7.4 A Council Member's demonstration was successfully undertaken by the IRO team in February 2020 around the use of the App for Council Members, which was well attended. This will be repeated during 2021 at their request.
- 7.5 A key element of Child in Care reviews is that of the participation of children and young people within this process. IRO's have a duty to offer every Looked After Child an IRO visit in between reviews where they are invited to state who they wish to attend their review, where they would like it to be held and what they would like to discuss. This also affords the IRO the opportunity to view the child's placement and ensure this can meet the child's needs.
- 7.6 In relation to participation of children and young people this is calculated as those that have attended a meeting / contributed to the process by means of a consultation form, observation by the IRO, advocacy, submitting a Mind Of My Own App note, using an interpreter and discussing issues directly with their IRO or social worker. In April 2019 participation was 99% and has increased to 100% in March 2020 and has been consistent which shows that children in care participate in their meetings and that IRO's continue to engage with children in care in creative ways.

8. What is working well?

- The IRO's are one of the most consistent professionals in a child's life in Medway with most them having been with the team for over two years.
- The IRO team is a permanent member of the Permanence Panel with meetings held every two weeks to review all children in care permanence plans.
- The realignment of children in care teams and the adolescent service are showing positive impact for children in care.
- The IRO's are consistently monitoring permanence plans and the IRO foot- print has increased.
- Participation of children in care has increased in their Child in Care reviews.
- Reverse takeover day undertaken and led by children and the Young Lives Foundation showing the day in a life of a child in care.
- IRO demonstration of the Mind of My Own App to council members.

- Implementation of the Medway Pledge by the MCYPC see appendix 1

9. What are we worried about?

- The changes in social workers for children due to the realignment of social work teams, although we hope that this will stabilise as the teams are embedded in their new services.
- The consistency in quality of care planning for all Looked After Children.
- The number of changes of social workers that some children experience.
- The impact on social workers to carry out Life Story work in the current climate where direct contact is impacted by Covid-19.
- The impact of children coming into care due to the spike in relation to the impact of Covid-19.
- Missing children in care during Covid19 and the additional risks, threats, and vulnerabilities this exposes them to.
- Children on waiting lists for emotional and mental health services especially during the Covid-19 period.

10. Consultation with young people

10.1 We have worked closely with the Young Lives Foundation (YLF) in relation to our communication with children and young people, including the MCYPC and Corporate Parenting Board. We have sought to co-design the way we write up a Child in Care Review, now writing this as a personalised letter to children and young people from their IRO and this has been well received. We have carried out the interviews for IROs and the new IRO manager with a care experienced young person ensuring that the role of children in care has influenced these appointments.

11. What needs to change / what are our plans?

- IRO's will monitor permanence for all children that come into care and where there are concerns around drift and delay, which includes greater scrutiny of Section 20 cases.
- IRO's will monitor children in long term placements and ensure that all children have long term placements identified at the earliest opportunity.
- IRO's will be consistent with the Dispute Resolution Notices to ensure that they monitor care plans for children in care and provide evidence for the impact these have on young people in their "care journey", impacting social work practice through the use of Dispute Resolutions.
- IRO's will carry out mid-way reviews for all children in care and there will be a clear IRO footprint on the child's electronic file.
- IRO's will continue to work towards improved timeliness for reviews for children and young people to 95% (however the IRO's team is aspirational and aim to get to 100% in the next year), including recording within timescales.
- Whilst compliance around the IRO's statutory function is important we want to continue to move towards an improved qualitative service for children in care.

Lead officer contact

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Top 10

Background papers

None to note

TOP 10!

- A Good Listener**
Have at least 1 ear for me
- Non-Judgemental**
If we are in care does that make us a problem?
- Consistent and Stable**
Be there for me, stick by me
- Contactable**
Can i reach you? Will you make time for me?
- Understanding**
Put yourself in my shoes, don't feel sorry for me
- Honest**
Don't beat around the bush, just tell me!
- Focused**
See me for me, I'm not just another number
- Realistic**
Don't make me a promise you can't keep
- Good Timekeeper**
It's just good manners!
- Resourceful**
Be creative, the same approach won't always work!

Do you meet
Medway
Young People's
TOP 10
professional
standards?

the young lives foundation

I AM BECAUSE WE ARE
MAYPC
REGISTERED CHARITY NO: 1119528

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