

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

28 JULY 2022

ATTENDANCE OF THE PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR ADULTS' SERVICES

Portfolio Holder: Councillor David Brake, Portfolio Holder for Adults' Services

Report from: Dr Lee-Anne Farach, Director of People

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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 Children's Independent Reviewing Office (IRO) for the period April 2021 until March 2022. This team is part of the wider Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Service. This report provides a high level and strategic coverage of this service's activity and should be read in conjunction with the accompanying annual IRO report that 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. This item was not finalised in time for despatch with the main agenda. The Chairman of the Committee is of the opinion that it should be considered at this meeting as a matter of urgency as permitted under section 100B of the Local Government Act 1972 to enable the Committee to consider this item at the same time as the Annual Report of the Independent Reviewing Officer Service.

2. Purpose of the IRO Service

- 2.1. The Independent Reviewing Officer (herein referred to as IRO) post is a statutory one supported by legislation. The IRO Handbook (2010) is the statutory guidance relating to care planning and reviewing arrangements for all children Local Authorities care for. The guidance is for children's services, IROs and Local Authorities and it covers the roles and duties of IROs and the strategic and managerial responsibilities of Local Authorities in establishing an effective IRO service. The Handbook should be used with Volume 2 Children Act 1989: care planning, placement and case review and other associated guidance such as Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010. The IRO service should report to the Local Authority any gaps in services for children they care for and be independent from the social work teams.
- 2.2. Medway's IRO service sits within the Safeguarding and Quality Assurance service and wider Children and Adults Directorate. The IROs are therefore independent of Children's Services with decision-making accountability. The IROs are accountable to the Director of People.
- 2.3. The team is made up of 7.6 IROs. The Fostering Independent Reviewing Officer (FIRO) is managed in this service and provides extra IRO capacity for 12 additional children. Whilst the team has benefited from some agency support covering sickness, the team is fully staffed with permanent posts. Case loads have remained stable, within the handbook guidance recommended caseloads, with some more experienced IROs having higher numbers of children whilst supporting newer members of the team.
- 2.4. The core function of the service is to review the Local Authority's care plans, for children in our care (with some key exceptions for former children who have left our care), monitor, and escalate concerns about the execution of these, ensuring their best outcomes. The service provides high support and challenge to the Local Authority in respect of its corporate parenting and safeguarding duties towards children we care for. The core functions of the IRO can be summarised below:
 - promoting children's voices
 - that plans for children we care for are based on good, updated quality assessments, plans are effective, purposeful and respond to each child's needs
 - help children and young people understand how an advocate could help them and their right to one
 - prevent any drift in care planning and the delivery of services to children we care for
 - monitoring the activity of the Local Authority as a corporate parent so that care plans have given proper consideration and weight to the child's wishes and feelings and that the child fully understands the implications of any changes made to his/her/their care plan
 - monitoring the performance of the Local Authority's function as a corporate parent in identifying any areas of poor practice, identifying

- patterns of concern emerging for individual children and for the collective experience children they care for and of the services they receive
- where the IRO identifies general concerns around the quality of the authority's services to its looked after children, the IRO should immediately alert senior managers.

3. Beyond the Pandemic

- 3.1. As discussed in last year's report, IROs adapted to former previous temporary legislation and government guidance issued in the pandemic, which has since been repealed. Last year's report recommended IROs would increase face to face visits and review meetings with children and young people. Post June 2021, when government guidance regarding Covid-19 changed, IROs started to undertake face to face reviews with children again, usually in their homes. By September 2021 this was mainly implemented. Most invited professionals attended virtually. In the new council wide working arrangements, IROs are identified as hybrid workers, mainly working from a variety of settings and spending time travelling to see children for and in between their statutory reviews.
- 3.2. IROs welcomed seeing children face to face and adjusting to travelling to see them again. This re-connecting with children and their carers was a priority for the IRO service and recommended from last year's report to support relationship-based practice; IROs have visited children living in areas outside of Medway, including Scotland, and where possible visiting children in between their review meetings. They have prioritised seeing children in unregulated and unregistered care arrangements.
- 3.3. Nationally the picture regarding IRO services returning to face-to-face meetings is variable, with Medway returning to face-to-face reviews sooner than most other Local Authorities.

4. Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis:

- 4.1. More boys and young men were cared for throughout the year, in March 2022, this was 250/442 males and 192/442 females (56.5%% males and 53.5% females). The largest age group of children in care are 10–15 and 16–17-year-olds representing 185/442 or 41.8% and 99/442 or 22.3% a total of 64.1%. of the cohort. This is like last year and representative of the national picture (table 1) with a similar higher percentage of older children entering care.
- 4.2. Overall, 125 children entered and left care during the year. The numbers overall were slightly less than a year ago and no month saw higher than 20 children entering care; this may suggest services progress swift and timely exits from care, with increased diversions away from care, increased support for children and their families. Family courts returning to a more normal delivery and progressing backlogged cases in family courts and disposals may have supported this trend too.

- 4.3. Medway is not an outlier for numbers of children we look after, in comparison to our statistical neighbours or the national trends. Overall, from April 2021 to March 2022 the rate of children we cared for per 10.000 at 66.2%, which sat below statistical neighbours at 72% and was slightly below the national rate at 67% at an average of 442 children overall for the year. Medway sits above the Southeast region (SERDN) of 53% who are not our main statistical neighbours.
- 4.4. During this reporting period IROs chaired a total of **1499** reviews for an average of 442 children and young people. For the past year **99.9%** of reviews were held in time; 2/1499 or 0.1% of reviews were held out of timescales for agreed and understood reasons. This is strong performance from the IROs and an improved picture from last year.
- 4.5. Children and young people's participation in their reviews, (including their views being represented in their absence) sat at **96.0%**. This calculation includes children under aged 4 years who are not able to give their views. A particular strength is the level of participation of children and young people in their review meetings, suggestive of the strong relationships Medway's children enjoy with IROs helping children's views be well considered.
- 4.6. This year IROs have worked hard to summarise the review into a letter which they write to the child and copy to parents in age-appropriate language. The letters are the record of the meeting and sent to the children and their parents to keep. Feedback from children, parents and carers and social workers has been particularly positive about this change of practice.
- 4.7. The IRO Handbook specifically tasks IROs to raise dispute resolution notifications (DRNs) where informal actions have failed to resolve and concerns about children's care plans and the Local Authority is expected to have a formal process underpinning escalations of these concerns through the senior management structure, with IROs individually having the authority to refer a matter concurrently to Cafcass as well as referring to them at any stage of the dispute process, as an independent advocate for the child when considering their human rights and their best interests and welfare. Medway has a DRN process and no DRNs were raised last year with Cafcass. During the year, **162 DRNs** were raised with 180 being resolved.
- 4.8. The IRO service has well established links to Medway's commissioned service 'The Young Lives Foundation' (YLF) who provide advocacy services for all children in need of help and protection. This year there were 136 new referrals for advocacy. Children in care represented 27.2% or 37 of these. YLF are commissioned to run a number of other services that include our children in care council (MCYPC) that supports a number of children that we care for and represents the group on our Corporate Parenting Board.

5. Climate change implications

- 5.1. [The Council declared a climate change emergency in April 2019](#) - item 1038D refers, and has set a target for Medway to become carbon neutral by 2050.

- 5.2. The IRO Handbook recommends that review meeting records should be received within 20 working days of the meeting. This year IROs have worked hard to complete these records within 15 days, sending these electronically ensuring they contribute to the Council's green agenda.
- 5.3. Visiting children, several of who live outside of Medway, equates to many miles travelled by IROs. Wherever possible, IROs use public transport for longer and planned journeys and will also group visits to children in similar areas. Booking transport in advance saves money for the Council as well as officers and supports this important agenda.

6. Priorities for 2022-23

Quality Of Practice

- We will improve permanence planning and the quality of 2nd reviews by IROs
- We will redesign and launch, through co-production with our children and young people, new consultation options
- We will contribute to Information Packs all children we care for that promotes the IRO service roles and responsibilities.

Quality Assurance

- We will develop a feedback strategy across the IRO Service, including mechanisms to feedback to organisation main learning themes, through quarterly quality assurance reporting
- We will continue to strengthen links with YLF and increase the number of referrals for advocacy to YLF from IROs next year.

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Appendices

None

Background papers

None