

## **Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

**7 August 2025**

### **Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report 2024-2025**

Report from: Dr Lee-Anne Farach, Director of People and Deputy Chief Executive

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#### **Summary**

The purpose of this report is to provide an account of the IRO service activity for the period 1st April 2024 to 31st March 2025, to consider the profile of the Local Authority cohort of children cared for, and trends and themes in how the Local Authority has discharged their duties for these children.

The IRO role is set within statutory framework of the IRO Handbook (2010), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-reviewing-officers-handbook> linked to the revised Care Planning Regulations and Guidance, established in the Children and Young People's Act 2008, introduced in April 2011.

The IRO service provides high support and challenge to the Local Authority in respect of its corporate parenting and safeguarding duties towards children and young people they care for.

#### **1. Recommendation**

- 1.1. The Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked to note the IRO Service Annual Report 2024-2025.

#### **2. Budget and policy framework**

- 2.1. The IRO Annual Report is a statutory report, stemming from the Handbook (2010) and it sets out a duty for the manager of the IRO service to publish an annual report on how the Local Authority has discharged its duties for children in care annually and comments on themes and trends in this work.
- 2.2. The IRO has a key independent role in relation to the promotion and quality of care planning for Children in Care, and for challenging drift and delay in

children's care and permanence plans. The service is an independent regulated one, to effectively provide this challenge, sited in the Local Authority.

- 2.3. The IRO Annual Report is published on the Council's website, and is reviewed Annually, contributing to strategic improvements for the care of children in care to Medway. It contributes to Medway's Corporate Parenting Strategy.

### 3. Background

- 3.1. The IRO Annual Report must comment on the delivery of the IRO service, and how the Local Authority has discharged its statutory duties to their children in care, noting any challenges and gaps in service provision. It must comment on the quality of planning and care of children and young people, and any themes noticed over the past year and deficits, noting escalations to senior managers and plans to address these.

### 4. Advice and analysis

- 4.1 The principle aims of the IRO service are:

- That all children being cared for should have an IRO who should remain a consistent figure in their (and if also in care, their siblings' lives), during their journey through care who they see at their reviews, in between them and who they know how to contact.
- That the IRO will chair (or help the child to chair) their Child in Care Review meetings (within twenty working days of them entering care, within 3 months after, and every 6 months thereafter).
- The promotion of the voice of the child or young person being cared for in their care plan, to include their views about their permanence options, and their day-to-day care arrangements.
- To ensure that plans made by the Local Authority for children they care for are based on current, detailed, and informed assessments, identifying their needs and effective interventions and services.
- To meet and consult with children and young people cared for, about their review meetings and their care plan, enabling them to authentically contribute and ensure that they understand the implications of any changes and how to access an advocate to help them. That they can make a formal complaint and seek their own legal advice regarding their care plans and how the Local Authority is discharging their duties.
- To identify, and when necessary, take action to prevent any unnecessary delay in care and permanence planning for children and the delivery of services to them; provide challenge and support to social workers, managers, and senior managers to ensure these are timely.

To act to improve the daily care needs of children from those who are caring for them.

- To hold an overview of the Local Authority's performance, as a corporate parent, and report on themes, trends, and any gaps in their duties to children they care for.
- To use an effective means of challenging the Local Authority including, a Dispute Resolution Procedure, with a right once these are exhausted, to convey concerns to CAFCASS, and to access their own independent legal advice. This includes powers to ask the Local Authority to suspend any planned moves for children, where there are disputes.

## 5. Recommendations for IRO service

### 5.1 Key recommendations for IROs and the service from the report are that the IROs/ the IRO service will:

- Collaborate with teams to develop and improve children's life story work. Increased focus of IRO service planning for next year will include the timing and quality of life story work for children.
- Review children subject to Deprivation of Liberty Orders (DOLs) and in unregulated care arrangements three monthly.
- Children's care Plans- implement quality assurance activities to help service improvement, to include the streamlining of other plans through quarterly activity, during Q2-Q4 (July 2025 – March 2026) and support work to develop care plans for children in care, aged under 16 years and under.
- Scope an IRO post 18-year offer and to discuss with senior managers by September 2025.
- Consider publishing a child friendly version of this plan, co-produced with children, by September 2025.
- Continue to scrutinise Adoption Support Plans, supporting greater open adoption.
- Refresh how IROs help young people to chair or steer their review meetings.
- Further develop IRO profiles, making these accessible to their children and young people.

And that the department should:

- consider whether an increased frontloading of assessments in PLO, and earlier interventions, may help families maintain children at home and reduce the need for care proceedings.

## 6. Risk management

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
Timeliness and Recording of Review Meetings	There is statutory guidance in relation to the timing of reviews; a first review is held within 4 weeks of a child coming into care, then a second review within the next 12 weeks or 3 months and then at least every six months after this.	Staffing levels have been maintained to ensure that children's Review Meetings meet with statutory requirements and support our strong performance in this area.	D IV
Children's participation in their Review Meetings	Participation is recorded as those children 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.	Staffing levels have been maintained to ensure that children's participation in their Review Meetings are provided through a variety of means and support our strong performance in this area, ensuring that children are listened to.	D IV

Likelihood	Impact:
A Very likely	I Catastrophic
B Likely	II Major
C Unlikely	III Moderate
D Rare	IV Minor

## 6. Consultation

- 6.1. In completing this report, the views of young people have been considered through their regular feedback into the service, feedback from individual IROs and feedback and consultation with services and partner agencies. Children's Senior Management Team have approved the report, and it has been presented to the Children and Adult's Directorate Management Team for comments and views.

## 7. Financial implications

- 7.1. There are no direct financial implications arising from the recommendations of this report.
- 7.2. At the time of writing, the IRO service has an approved staffing establishment of 9.61 full time equivalent (FTE) employees. There are 9 permanent staff members and a 0.61 FTE vacancy which is being covered by agency staffing. The staffing establishment includes management as well as IRO's.

## 8. Legal implications

- 8.1. There are no specific legal considerations in this report.

### Lead officer contact

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### Appendices

Appendix 1 The Independent Reviewing Officer Report 2024 - 2025

### Background papers

MacAlister J (2022) Independent Review of children's social care final report (DfE)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-childrens-social-care-final-report>

Dfe (2023) Children's Social Care: 'Stable Homes Built on Love'

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/childrens-social-care-stable-homes-built-on-love>