

TITLE OF REPORT: IRO Annual Report

REPORT OF: Sharon Davey & Haether Jenkins

Purpose of the Report

1. To update on the progress from IRO (Independent Reviewing Officer) Service throughout the year of 2023/2024.
2. Collate themes and learning for the service and partners for 2024/2025.

Background

3. In Gateshead we have a team of 11 full time workers who are based within the Safeguarding Children Unit. They are a skilled, knowledgeable and passionate team, who have a great deal of experience working with children, young people, their families and carers. 1 member of our team holds the post of Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) and also currently chairs Child Protection Conferences; 1 is an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) who solely does foster care reviews and the 8 others have the dual roles of both IRO and Child Protection Chair. They oversee planning for children who are in our care, who are privately fostered, remanded to the care of the local authority and placed in secure accommodation. IRO's have held caseloads of around 90 children throughout the year of 2023/24. Moving into 2024/25 the role of the IRO continues to be strengthened with additional IRO funded to bring caseloads in line with the recommendations of 80 children. This will ensure good quality oversight between reviews to track and monitor the progress of care planning and children achieving plans of permanence.
4. We have a dedicated Business Support unit which is the backbone of the service. They provide note taking for all our child protection conference, LADO meetings and Pre-Secure Review meetings. There has been a real focus this year on the timeliness of notes shared with families which is the mechanism by which families have a written record of discussion and agreed outcomes and recommendations in a timely way. The completion of notes have been tracked weekly to ensure these are shared no later than 20 day point. We write our CIOC Notes and Child Protection Plans narratively to the child. This has been identified as good practice from our neighbouring Local Authorities. We will be partnering with a neighbouring Local Authority to support our Business Support Team in looking at smarter ways of completing Child Protection meeting minutes, the distribution of reports and quality assurance processes around partnership reports. We will be partnering with another Local Authority to support in their development around narrative practice.
5. The Care Planning and Review Regulations (2010) and the IRO Handbook set out clear standards for us. These stipulate that each child in our care should have an allocated IRO and give us clear expectations as to how IRO's should practice.

6. The IRO role is specialist and unique, we feel it is one of the most privileged roles in social work. The IRO is tasked with overseeing a child's journey and the role of the local authority as a "corporate parent". They must chair each child in our care review. An IRO is not involved in managing a child's case nor do they duplicate the role of a child's social worker. IRO's need to have a different relationship with a child and those who care for them. The IRO needs to have the authority and the channels to be able to challenge effectively and meaningfully, work collaboratively and not collusively with those making plans. The children should always be at the centre of our practice.
7. Working Together to Safeguard Children sets out the requirement for a Conference Chair to convene and chair a Child Protection Conference and to uphold the standards of the Safeguarding Partnership. The chair should provide independent scrutiny of child protection plans and ensure that the measures in place are keeping a child safe. Importantly, the chair must ensure that where possible a child and a child's family or carers are involved in the child protection conference meeting and in making plans.
8. Guidance for our families attending a child protection conference explains that "The conference will be chaired by someone who is qualified and very experienced in the safety and welfare of children. The Chair is independent of the day-to-day work that happens with the family, Gateshead procedures describe that in addition to their independence, "The status of the Chair should be sufficient to ensure multi-agency commitment to the conference and the child protection plan,".

Our Priorities 2022/2023

Our priority	What we have done
<p>Promoting the voices of Children and their Families and ensuring these have influence and impact</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developed a family member feedback form for conference. Provide the link in letters to family and a QR code at conference. • Providing relational practice training specific to IROs. • Reviewed and developed upon our conference invites and agendas for families and also professionals. • Developed the ways in which we deliver conferences. • Reviewed and improving conference training available to partner agencies. • Led narrative practice training and consistent use of narrative approach within Child Protection Plans, Child in our care minutes and care plans. • Issued challenges and DRPs for care planning, drift and delay and promoting children’s views about their care plan. • Promoted the improvement of plans to focus on the impact that harm has upon a child, and what needs to happen to improve their lived experiences and opportunities. • Provided training to our business support team around narrative practice and effective recording of the lived experience of the child. • Routine dip samples audits of visits to children.
<p>Promoting Family Relationships & Identity</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoted the use of family group conferences as part of child protection planning, where this has not been instigated prior to conference. • Set the expectations that genograms, ecomaps and chronologies are brought to conferences to inform planning for children and their families. • Being a part of practice development around reunification policy and life story
<p>Achieving Permanence and stability for Children in Our Care</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved our consistency in holding midway reviews • Provided the views of the IRO into legal panel and decision-making meetings • Ensured that ratifying reviews are held where the local authority is proposing long term plans for children to court. • Reviewed placement with parent situations and promoting the discharge of care orders for those children who have been home for over 12 months and it is safe to do so. • Plotted out core groups or care team meetings at the end of child protection conferences and child in our care reviews to ensure that these are occurring and progressing plans.
<p>The Best Outcomes for Children (Quality and Compliance)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved our own quality assurance reports, so that we can challenge and develop our own practice. • Taken part in learning reviews, multi-agency audits, thematic internal audits and quarterly audits. • Improved our timescales for the completion and sharing of child in our care review and conference minutes.

What the Data tells us:

9. In 2023/24 83.9% of Children In Our Care Reviews were held in timeframe. Last year this was 81.6%. This is a growing improvement, and we want this to continue into 2024/25.
10. Out of the 614 children within care, we capture how their voice in care planning and reviews is recorded.
 - ✓ 29% of our children attended their child in our care review and gave their views themselves.
 - ✓ 40% conveyed their views to the meeting where they did not attend.
 - ✓ 15% of children were under 4 at the time of their review.
 - ✓ 11% attended and were supported to give their views.
 - ✓ 3% of children did not attend or share their views with the review meeting.
 - ✓ 1% of children attended their meeting and did not speak for themselves.
 - ✓ 1% of children attended their review with an advocate.
11. In 2023/24 100 % of Private Fostering Reviews were held in timescales.
12. In 2023/24 1 Secure Reviews were chaired by an IRO. There is a separate IRO who chairs these meetings and is independent form the care planning process.
13. In 2023/24 89 % of Initial Child Protection Conferences (ICPC) were in timescale.
14. We understand the gravity of child protection and do all that we can to make sure these meetings can go ahead as planned. Where conferences have not been able to progress within the timescales, conference chairs are meeting with social workers to ensure that children are safe and being visited. We understand the reasons for the delay and for the most part this is due to an important person, such as a parent being unable to attend the conference. We have also delayed a conference where reports have not been shared with a family or professionals to allow them to prepare for the meeting.
15. In 2023/24 99.9% of Review Child Protection Conferences (RCPC) were in timescale.
16. Following the recommendations and outcomes of a safeguarding partnership themed audit on our child protection Conference system, the IRO service lead is chairing a task and finish group. This group have reviewed the training on offer to the partnership in relation to children protection conferences and core groups. Guidance aligned with children's services practice standards is being developed. The group has also improved report templates for conferences, developed more collaborative invites for professionals, family and children and also the conference agenda. The intention is that these foundations improve how we develop plans, ensure we work effectively to protect children with a child and their family and avoid children returning to this process.

17. We hold a designated conference when child protection plans have been in place for 15 months There have been 9 of these meetings over the period. The current process is that we have a conference chaired by a different chair and the current chair also attends. We are reviewing this process to ensure this is having impact and positive outcomes for our children.
18. We need to understand the obstacles and factors which lead to longer child protection plans and create the conditions to address these in a meaningful way with partners and with a family.
19. Our multi-agency child protection audits tell us that we have good multi agency attendance at our child protection conferences. Reports are shared with families prior to the meeting and the chair consults with families about how the conference will be conducted before the conference beings. Moving forwards into 2024/25, we will review the effectiveness of this working group through the Safeguarding Childrens Partnership. Plans will include working with our partner agencies around the quality of reports and how these influence and support safe care planning.
20. We have made feedback forms available to family and to professionals through a link and a QR code following a conference. This will influence our practice as a team going forward.
21. Our work all fits very well with the recommendations and guidance in the new Working Together and we are looking at how we can strengthen this further.
22. At the time of writing this report there were no children who required a child protection plan over 24 months.
23. Repeat Child Protection Plans have reduced from 21% 2022/23 to an average of 17% in 2023/24 last 6 months. There has been an intensive focus on ensuring at every delisting conference a contingency plan is agreed and in place to support families in the longer term. We will continue to monitor our progress.
24. In 2023/24 100% Foster Care Reviews were held in timeframe. Our IRO for Foster Care Reviewing Officer retired in November 2023. We ensured that we had a consistent person in the interim and were pleased to appoint a new permanent (and very experienced) person to this post who began working with us in February. Her priorities for 24/25 will be included in our IRO development plan.

What our children, families and professionals tell Us:

25. Over 2023/2024 we have received some fantastic feedback:
 - ✓ “Your IRO is such a good person who listens and collates and wants to hear the best answers to achieve the best outcomes – she has taken time to understand us a family unit.”
 - ✓ “I attended the ICPC this afternoon... He (the chair) really does command the meeting. He sent... out of the room so he could speak frankly to... Throughout the meeting he spoke very directly at times when it was

necessary. He was also able to bring some light heartedness into the meeting, to ensure Mam and Dad stayed on board with the flow of the meeting. He explained the process to parents extremely well. Agencies knew what was expected of them. Parents knew exactly what was going on.”

- ✓ “Fantastic feedback from the new improved partnership cp training.”
- ✓ “I thought this was a very positive conference and it was lovely to be a part of it. Parents came across so well and I think they’ll engage in the further assessment period.”
- ✓ “It was lovely meeting you in person tonight, and the boys thought you were wonderful!”
- ✓ “I felt calm and like I had been helped massively.”
- ✓ “The really good chair person put things in place, as did all professionals.”
- ✓ “I felt great that my opinion was heard.”

Promoting voices of children and young people

26. We have agreed a consistent approach to how we record children’s participation to ensure we have a robust IRO quality assurance tool.
27. Our IRO’s all have a profile which we send out to children prior to the Children in Our Care Review. This helps children and young people understand who their IRO is, what they do and provides contact details for the future.
28. Our priority is to hold meetings face to face, and we are flexible so that everyone who needs to be there can be included. We are working with our fostering and kinship colleagues to promote the importance of ensuring that children and young people and can attend.
29. We have reviewed our tools for consultation with our young ambassadors and have produced QR codes linked to an online form that our children can use to share their views ahead of their review and feedback on their experiences of their review- so that we make sure we are getting it right. These have been widely circulated with our children’s homes staff, fostering colleagues and social workers to promote take up.
30. Where children do not want us to visit, we are exploring how to remain connected. Some of our IRO’s send a letter.
31. We are building our links with One Voice, our Children in Care Council, and will be planning monthly meetings with them. They have told us that one of their priorities is to ensure that children and young people understand what they can expect from foster care and are developing a “what’s the crack?” pack. They are also keen that foster carers training incorporates how to create a home for the children in the care, for example, where safe and age appropriate, allowing them to have keys to the house and be able to be home alone.
32. 39 referrals were made for advocacy April 23-March 24. Moving into 2024/25 we will be supporting NAYS rolling out awareness raising training, visiting all children’s homes to share awareness of the service and the IRO Service Manager and NAYS will be reporting quarterly within the Senior Management Team on progress made.

33. We have instigated awareness raising about our advocacy offer from NYAS across the wider service, ensuring that where they need it our children have access to support to enable them to be heard. NYAS support children 8-18 years, 18–25-year-olds who are care experienced. We want to build on our use of the service to include children who attend child protection conferences.
34. We use NEPACS for our independent visitor service. There are currently 6 children matched.
35. We have continued to challenge and adapt some of the language that we use in what we say and how we record information about our children and young people. We can see this having a ripple effect not only within children’s services, but also across partner agencies, for example, the nature of the information that case workers gather and use to produce an Education Health Care Plan (EHCP).

How effective our IRO challenge and scrutiny is:

36. IRO’s will review children and young people’s plans to ensure these are progressing and archiving plans of permanence in a timely way. This includes monitoring the progress of the plan between Children In Our Care Reviews and conversing with a range of professionals, family members and the child. Where there appears to be a delay for children and young people, an IRO will raise a professional challenge called a Dispute Resolution Process (DRP). This will involve highlighting the concern or delay with the relevant level of management to achieve the fastest change or outcome for the child.
37. The Dispute Resolution Process is our formal challenge process, each IRO service must have one. This has been shared with our colleagues across the wider service and is very clear. Central to our challenge is the impact for the child or family we are working with to create a positive outcome or change for them. We commence a challenge at an informal level and can escalate where deem necessary to create action. There are 3 stages to our formal process however, this does not need to be linear. The challenge will be made at the most appropriate level to create the quickest outcome for the child or young person.
38. All DRP Stage 3 meetings are chaired by the Deputy Strategic Director and have a clear focus on progressing the care planning and addressing any drift and delay for the child.
39. We have issued 138 DRP’s for a variety of reasons, themes include drift and delay, practice issues, safety and care planning.
 - ✓ DRP’s issued at DRP stage 1 (77) relate to “Care Planning” (19) “Practice”(42) and “Drift and Delay” (15)
 - ✓ DRP’s issued at DRP stage 2 themes relate to “Care Planning” (7), Safety (3), “Drift and Delay” and “Practice”.
 - ✓ DRP’s issued at DRP stage 3 themes relate have tended to relate to “care Planning”.

40. Moving into 2024/25 we will be reviewing the outcome for our children and young people through our DRP Quality Assurance Clinic with the Principal Social Worker to ensure this challenge has been effective, review what impact and change happened as a result of this challenge and feed into the wider service area of development or improvement in service delivery for children.
41. IRO's are part of a number of Multi Agency Audits completed within the Safeguarding Childrens Partnership and also within the internal Quality Assurance Framework. These include dip samples on; the quality of social worker supervision, Voices of the child in care planning, reasons for child protection plans exceeding 24 months and reasons for ending a child protection plan at 3 months. The findings are shared through monthly updated into the Strategic Quality Assurance Group (SQAG) chaired by the Assistant Director and then to the Children Services Performance Meetings chaired by the Principal Social worker.
42. Moving into 2024/25 we have started to provide themes in practice, themes from DRP's and feedback from families to help improve the quality of practice and service deliver from Children's Services. This is to compliment the dip samples shared monthly at the SQAG.
43. Moving into 2024/25 we will be investing in Quality Assurance Training for all IRO's through an independent Training Company. We continue to upskill our workforce to ensure our 'bird eye view' on practice has a quality assurance focus. We will be in a position to offer guidance, advice and professional challenge with regards to improving practice.

Next Steps for 2024/2025

These are the headings from IRO service development plan:

- IRO's will form meaningful relationships through visiting children and young people. IROs will record this with purpose and to progress and influence care planning in a timely way for children.
- Increase children and young people having input and shaping plans through attending reviews and participation in care planning.
- Feedback from children and families influence our practice and service delivery.
- Children to have a life long meaningful relationship and information about their lived experiences and family.
- IRO's are part of supporting children to maintain important relationships and develop new and positive relationships .
- Consistent oversight, drive care planning and challenge when delays may occur in achieving plans of permanence.
- IRO's influencing and driving good practice to achieve timely care plans for children and young people.
- IROs have robust role in quality assurance as leaders in practice.
- IROs will work with the Partnership to enhance outcomes for children and young people.
- IROs are continuing the progress in their skills, knowledge and abilities.
- Children's voices to be at the centre of reviews to share their lived experience and feed into future development or learning.
- Foster Carer Reviews to feed into wider service developments and communication across the partnership.
- Develop systems to strengthen the Foster Care Review Process.

Recommendations

It is recommended that

- (i) Note the content of this report.

for the following reason(s)

- (i) Improve on service delivery and explore where any areas of practice can be strengthened.
- (ii) To provide consistent feedback.

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APPENDIX 1

Policy Context

1. This report is in line with the Working Together, Children Care Planning Regulations and Children Act alongside Childrens Services procedures and provided annually.

Background

2. This report is in line with the Working Together, Children Care Planning Regulations and Children Act alongside Childrens Services procedures and provided annually.

Consultation

3. This report will be presented to the Safeguarding Partnership.

Alternative Options

4. There are no alternative to present.

Implications of Recommended Option

5. Resources:

- a) **Financial Implications** – There is no change to report since 2023/2024.
- b) **Human Resources Implications** – This report is to be held by HR for future reference.
- c) **Property Implications** - There is no change to report since 2023/2024.

6. **Risk Management Implication** – The detail of this report is confidential due to the nature of enquires.

7. **Equality and Diversity Implications** – There is no change to the previous 2023/2024.

8. **Crime and Disorder Implications** – There is no change to the previous 2023/2024.

9. **Health Implications** - No implications

10. **Climate Emergency and Sustainability Implications** – No implications.

11. **Human Rights Implications** – No implications.

12. **Ward Implications** – No implications

13. **Background Information:** None