

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S SERVICE
INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER'S
ANNUAL REPORT 2017 – 2018

1. Purpose of the Report

1.1 This Annual Independent Reviewing Officer's (IRO) Report reflects the compliance, progress and contribution the IRO service has made to the outcomes for Looked after Children in Rotherham and against required statutory legislation as set out in the IRO Handbook and Care Planning Regulations (amended 2015). This includes quantitative and qualitative evidence relating to the IRO services for the period of April 1st 2017 to 31st March 2018.

1.2 Each Looked after Child or Young Person in Rotherham has an allocated IRO, which allows the IRO to build a relationship with the child or young person, monitor progress between reviews and address any delay in implementing the child's care plan in a timely manner leading to placement stability and positive impact for the child. The IRO monitors the child's care plan between Looked after Reviews and is informed of any significant events within the child's life to ensure positive outcomes for Rotherham's looked after young people.

2. Purpose of the Service and Legal Context

2.1 The Independent Review Officers' (IRO) service is set within the framework of the updated IRO Handbook, linked to revised Care Planning Regulations and Guidance, introduced in April 2011 and reviewed and amended in 2015. This most recent review strengthened the IRO role in relation to the wider overview of each child's journey through care, including regular monitoring and follow-up between reviews. The IRO has a key role in relation to the improvement of care planning for Children in Care, challenging drift and delay and ensuring the best possible outcomes for individual children.

2.2 The National Children's Bureau (NCB) research 'The Role of Independent Reviewing Officers in England' (March 2014) provides a wealth of information and findings regarding the efficacy of IRO services. The research outlines a number of important recommendations with three having a particular influence on IRO's work plan priorities:

- i) Where IRO's identify barriers to their ability to fulfil their role, or systemic failures in the service to looked after children, they must raise this formally with senior managers. These challenges and the response should be included in the Annual Report.
- ii) IRO's method for monitoring cases and how this activity is recorded should be clarified.
- iii) A review of IRO's core activities and additional tasks should be undertaken. There is a need to establish whether IRO's additional activities compromise independence or capacity.

3. Profile of the IRO Service

3.1 The Rotherham IRO service sits under the auspices of the Safeguarding unit and also includes the foster carer IRO, Right to Rights children's advocacy service and the Independent Visitor service.

3.2 The IRO service operates within the framework of the IRO Handbook. This is statutory guidance issued to Local Authority's in 2011 and is prescriptive in relation to its remit but its primary function is in relation to the improvement, development and quality assurance of the care planning for our Looked after children and to challenge drift and delay in the making and delivering of those plans for children and young people.

3.3 IRO's have an important and critical contribution to the planning for children. We are currently developing a suite of data which will be more attuned to identifying themes and patterns of concerns in respect of individual children and collectively and to make senior leaders aware of where we need to take positive action. IRO's have a duty to prevent drift and delay in care planning but to also ensure that children's plans move with grip and pace. The responsibility of being a Corporate Parent is significant and within Rotherham we have committed as part of our Rotherham Family Approach to ensuring we always ask, 'would this be good enough for our child'. The IRO service is fundamental in ensuring that the Local Authority are not only meeting our children's needs but being also aspirational around their future

3.4 It is our key focus over the next 6 months that the IRO service will be linked and culturally embedded within the social work teams across LAC, Locality and the Disability Service with the implementation of the Link Team agenda. Each IRO has a specific team or area in which to drive good practice. They will use the IRO Handbook as a bench mark for good practice and this will be developed into the suite of data via Insight.

3.5 The IRO service in Rotherham consists of:

- Rebecca Wall – Head of Service for Safeguarding, Quality and Learning,
- Tracey Arnold – Service Manager for the IRO and Advocacy Service
- 9 full time permanent IRO's and 1 agency IRO.
- Full time Foster Care IRO
- We have recently been given permission for a further agency IRO for 12 weeks given the rises in our looked after population.

3.6 The Head of Service and Service manager have been in post for 12 and 4 months respectively and are very much committed to ensuring that the IRO footprint and strategic overview of practice drives both cultural and practice standards change within the Local Authority for our children.

3.7 Through the last quarter of this reporting year we had unprecedented sickness levels within the service with at one point over a third of the Team either off sick or on a phased return to work. This has been unusual for the service and has resulted in challenges around managing demand and timeliness, while also supporting continuing relationships for you young people.

3.8 The team is predominantly staffed with female staff. Of the current staff group 2 are male. The majority of the team are white British ethnic origin, with 2 Black team members. All the IRO's have significant post qualifying experience, most have been team managers and one has been a previous Service manager.

3.9 To support strategic oversight, positive information sharing and critical challenge the Service Manager for the IRO service contributes to a number of the panel processes, to support a joint strategic approach to driving forward good practice and outcomes. This supports a clear avenue

of commutation to allow themes and issues from practice from the IRO to be feedback into strategic decision making.

4. A - Quantitative information - Looked After Children and IRO Service.

4.1 At the end of March 2018, there were 628 Looked after children within Rotherham, which is an increase of 141 at March 2017. This equates to 111.0 per 10,000 population. This places Rotherham above its statistical neighbours (81.3) and the national average (62). Admissions into care continued to increase through the time period reaching an all-time high of 650 in July 2018.

4.2 In terms of context of the IRO service, we have undertaken 1658 reviews, 96.1% being undertaken within timescales. The reviews not held in timescales were due to IRO sickness levels and linked to social workers not completing the necessary pre meeting reports prior to the review. Where this was felt to be detrimental to the child to progress, a decision was made to postpone the full review.

4.3 The IRO handbook recommends that the average caseload for an IRO is between 50 and 70 children. At times through the reporting period and particular in quarter 4 linked to IRO sickness and IRO's on a phased return or off work sick, the caseloads ranged from 74 to 79. It is important to note that the size of caseload alone does not indicate the whole workload for an IRO. There are a number key responsibilities that we expect the IRO to fulfil including visits to children between reviews, midway reviews, attending key strategy or care planning meetings and raising challenge or Escalations where concerns cannot be resolved informally. IRO's complete a Quality and Compliance before every review and write up all their own decisions and minutes. In terms of contributing to the strategic footprint each IRO has a Link Team, completes monthly 'lets' reflect' Audits and contributes to performance clinics.

4.4 The number of children who have ceased to be looked after has been growing month on month from 12 in January, to 14 in February to 26 in March 2018; however, these figures are low in comparison to the number entering care for the same period, 27 in January, 18 in February and 44 in March 2018.

4.5 Analysis of the data together with varied professional opinions as to the increased volume is a complicated and multi-faceted issue which includes the following:

- The legacy issue which is focusing on addressing previous and historical poor practice and performance.
- An increase in the complexity of cases which include CSE, international components including Eastern European families, human trafficking and radicalisation.

- The number of new born babies who are removed from parents who have had multiple children removed over a period of time.
- The outcome of the Children Act section 20 review in the wake of case law Re N, aimed at avoiding the misuse and abuse of section 20 arrangements.
- As a previous inadequate authority, it was necessary to have a robust PLO and LGPM process to manage the initiation of proceedings.
- Emerging and ongoing areas of work including proceedings which are initiated from police operational investigations.

4.6 In order to reduce the number of Looked after children, there have been a number of strategies put in place in order to shift the balance and as corporate parents we need to be mindful of the following:

- The Right Child Right Care strategy ensures that the right planning is in place for each child and that permanency plans, in whatever form, are moved along with pace.
- There has been a cohort of 170 children identified where there is a possibility of a return home to family members. While it has been acknowledged it may not be possible to secure alternative permanence or a return home for all these children, the Right Child Right Care review aim is focused on this group and explore barriers.
- As a learning organisation, we need to re-visit the frontloading, developing family networks and use of family genograms in order to place with family when possible at the right time and without delay.
- We know that the highest numbers of young people who are accommodated under section 20 are young men between the ages of 15 and 17. Frontloading Edge of Care provision has reduced this number and ensured that accommodation becomes a measure of last resort. The IRO Service Manager undertakes a section 20 overview each month and presents to PLOP business meeting.

4.7 IRO's are responsible for ensuring that looked after children achieve permanence and this this occurs without drift or delay. Permanency planning is integral to their role and this is being embedded within the cultural norms of the authority. The percentage of looked after children who have secured permanency through Special Guardianship, Child Arrangement Orders or Adoption increased to 34.6% in March 2018, a rise from 16.7% in January 2018.

5. Participation of Young People:

5.1 In relation to young people engaging and participating in their looked after review, performance data indicates that the vast majority of LAC reviews involved the young person either through their attendance, contributing themselves or using an advocate to act on their behalf or sending a written response but did not want to attend the formal review meeting. In 75.3 % of reviews the IRO has some form of contribution from the child. 18.7% of the children who are looked after are under 4 therefore do not contribute in the way which is captured by the performance data. A further 2.5% of young people did not attend their review or sent their views.

5.2 A critical part of the IRO role is to visit children prior to their review. There has been a drive to focus on these visits since April 2018 and the data shows that this is becoming embedded within the service. From a very low base of 14 recorded visits made to children in April 2017 to monthly figures of between 52 to 75 visits per month in July 2018. There were some recording issues historically where visits were being recorded under IRO case notes and this practice has now been reviewed and we are better able to capture visiting data to review and monitor progress in this area.

5.3 As part of the IRO development for 2018 - 2019, we are working to support IRO's facilitating young people either chairing or co-chairing their reviews. This piece of work is critical to the embedding of the child's voice within their plans and the wider organisation. The service has trialled this with one IRO who prepared a sibling group of 3 to chair their review which resulted in the completion of a care plan for the adults and professionals and a care plan for the children in their own language which they could understand.

6. Permanence Outcomes:

6.1 Permanence outcomes for looked after children is a key way for IRO's to be able to monitor their impact to measure where positive outcomes have been achieved for children and young people.

6.2 The percentage of looked after children who have ceased to be looked after due to Adoption, the making of a Special Guardianship orders or Child arrangements order has been inconsistent ranging from 37.5% in 2014/2015, rising to 40.1% in 2015/2016, reducing to 27.9% in 2016/2017 and dipping to 27.3% in 2017/2018. The Right Child Right Care strategy has been put in place in order to support achieving permanence through permanent orders to family carers, foster carers, or exploring return to

parents'. In terms of development over the next year, early permanence planning remains a key priority explicit in the IRO's responsibilities, ensuring that this is on the agenda for each looked after review. There are good strategic links between the Service Manager for the IRO service and the Service Manager for LAC ensuring a joined up approach to permanency outcomes.

6.3 In terms of the pace of completion of adoptions, the time between a child entering care and being placed with adopters was on average 325 days. This remains below our statistical neighbour average of 511 days and the national average of 558 days and places Rotherham within the top quartile.

6.4 The time between the placement order being made and the match with the adoptive parents is on average 125 days, compared to our statistical neighbour average of 214 days and the national average of 226 days, putting Rotherham in the top quartile.

6.5 Whilst there has been a dip in the numbers of children being adopted within Rotherham, there are 43 children on the Adoption pathway and therefore in a good position to increase numbers in the next year.

6.6 The number of our young people who are care leavers has increased since 2014/2015 performance data resulting in 2017/2018 figures of 257, a rise of 34 since 2016/2017. Despite the increase in the numbers of care leavers, performance remains strong with the number of care leavers with an up to date pathway plan has increased to 70.3%.

6.7 With an increased presence of the Service manager for the IRO's on the Residential panel, held weekly, there is a greater emphasis on collaborative working in relation to preparing our young people to move on to appropriate independent living and this work needs to happen much earlier in the young person's journey. This is one of the priorities of the IRO service over the next reporting period. We are looking at the possibility of a specific IRO who can focus on those young people who are in residential care and those who are moving into semi-independent living to ensure that their plan has grip and pace. This innovation will be the focus of the next 6 months.

7. Care Plans

7.1 The number of children and young people with an up to date plan has increased from a low of 79.1% in 2016/2017 to 89.7% in 2017/2018.

7.2 The IRO plays a key role in ensuring the quality of plans for looked after children in terms of securing good outcomes. As part of the role of driving forward quality outcomes, as well as ensuring compliance, the IRO service completes an IRO Quality Assurance and Compliance checklist prior to each review. This process has been in place since October 2016. It allows the IRO to comment on key areas of the young person's plan and journey through care and offer an overall grading as to the quality of the work completed around the young person. There are 4 gradings; Outstanding, Good, Requires Improvement and Inadequate. In order not to duplicate work, where a case is graded as Inadequate this is also regarded as a stage 1 Escalation and a plan is formulated between the IRO and Team manager following the review to support improvement.

7.3 The IRO service undertook 2037 quality and compliance audits from April 2017 to April 2018. Whilst the vast majority were Requires Improvement, the number of Good audits are increasing month on month whilst the 366 which were inadequate triggered a stage 1 escalation and a subsequent action plan.

7.4 Feedback from IRO's in their performance meetings highlights the quality of care plans as the issue which needs to be improved over the next reporting period. This will be a key area of focus for the IRO's to share via the Link Team relationships and will work to address the consistency of good quality care plans for our looked after children.

8. Placement Stability

8.1 The increase in the number of looked after children are part of a national trend and as a result the placement market is increasingly saturated making appropriate matching decisions an increasing challenge. The Intensive Support Programme undertaken by Rotherham Therapeutic Team is having some positive impact on the number of placement disruptions for the most vulnerable and challenging of our young people. As a result of the Right Child Right Care project, it is envisaged that long term placements will be converted to Special Guardianships orders or Child arrangement orders which will have a significant impact on the stable placement performance data over the course of the latter end of 2018. A further 44 children are on track to have Long term matches progressed with their current foster carers in the latter half of 2018, early 2019.

B. Qualitative Information - Achievements and Impact of the IRO Service.

9. IRO Monitoring and Challenge

9.1 The IRO Handbook and Care Planning Regulations (2010) clearly place responsibility upon the IRO to 'monitor the child's case' on an ongoing basis. There is the expectation that the IRO will challenge managers where necessary and 'champion' positive care planning which is timely and relevant in respect of individual children. As a part of the monitoring function, the IRO also has a duty to monitor the performance of the local authority's function as a corporate parent and to identify any areas of poor practice. IRO's seek to ensure good outcomes for children. They do this on an individual basis through the quality assurance role they have within the LAC Review process.

9.2 The IRO's undertake considerable work in working to ensure that they offer a high level of challenge balanced with a high level of support when they see concerns around outcomes and impact for a child. In order to reflect this role, improve the IRO footprint and evidence of restorative challenge we developed the IRO preparation for review tool. The Quality Assurance and Compliance checklist launched in October 2016 was developed for IRO's and CP Conference Chairs to complete before every review to reflect their discussions and view of the child's journey through care as reflected on their file. This includes consideration of multiagency practice around health assessments, PEP's and SDQ's. This has supported us to build on the positive practice or to highlight concerns around cases in a more formal and consistent way. The QAC checklists are graded alongside the Ofsted grading (Outstanding to inadequate) and an overall grading is given. The QAC does consider key areas of compliance but also focuses on quality. A key element of the checklist is the rationale for the grading and the discussion with the SW and Team Manager that takes place around this. When cases are graded by the IRO as inadequate this is regarded as a stage 1 escalation in line with our Challenge and Escalation process and there is an expectation that the IRO develops and action plan in conjunction with the manager to ensure that actions are taken forward.

9.3 **Table 1** below highlights the progress that has been achieved over the past few months in terms of the reportable IRO footprint. There has been a real drive in terms of the visits to children and the number of midway reviews being undertaken each month by the IRO service.

9.4 Midway reviews are an integral part of the check and challenge which IRO's bring to the progress of children's care plans. At mid points

between children’s reviews, the IRO will undertake an exercise with the social worker in order to check on the progress of the decisions and recommendations of the review. The key aim is to minimise drift and delay in achieving agreed outcomes. As we progress through the compliance to quality journey, we know the IRO midway reviews become more embedded within the culture of the organisation and have an impact on the Right Child Right Care cohort.

9.5 The trajectory of visits to children and midway reviews has increased throughout August and September to 62 visits to children being accomplished in September and 69 midway reviews being undertaken in the same month. The challenge for the IRO service over the next reporting period is how we measure the effectiveness of this activity in terms of the progression of the right plan for a child.

Table 1

	Visits	Midway Reviews	LAC Reviews
Apr-17	14	0	101
May-17	28	0	139
Jun-17	45	0	136
Jul-17	33		138
Aug-17	24	0	119
Sep-17	40	1	146
Oct-17	30	1	153
Nov-17	56	33	142
Dec-17	27	9	125
Jan-18	58	26	173
Feb-18	25	17	140
Mar-18	53	55	166
Total	433	142	1678

9.6 **Table 2** below reflects the Quality Assurance and Compliance Checklists that have been completed and their grades. They are completed on the child's file and grading reflects the IRO's view of the QAC on the file and care planning process.

Table 2

Month	Good	Requires Improvement	Improvement / Inadequate	Grading Not Recorded	Total
Apr-2017	0	2	0	91	93
May-2017	9	64	29	11	113
Jun-2017	10	65	28	14	117
Jul-2017	7	74	42	5	128
Aug-2017	7	69	32	4	112
Sep-2017	11	97	20	8	136
Oct-2017	13	101	23	5	142
Nov-2017	17	73	18	8	116
Dec-2017	10	61	12	0	83
Jan-2018	23	94	15	0	132
Feb-2018	21	71	10	1	103
Mar-2018	36	75	25	0	136
Total	164	846	254	147	1411

9.7 The focus over the coming months is to create a pathway via the existing performance meetings, Senior manager meetings and Corporate Parenting panel whereby senior managers and partners within children services can be briefed on themes emerging from this date and to tie this into Quality learning and Development for our staff.

9.8 The Thematic headline messages from the escalations are as follows:

- Stage 1 escalations between IRO's and team managers are generally focused upon no pre meeting reports being prepared for a

LAC review by the social worker, reports for the review not being shared with parents and young people prior to the review, decisions and recommendations not being acted upon and not being communicated to the parties who attend the review when a recommendation is in dispute and issues in terms of the progression of care plans.

- Escalations which are progressed within stages 2, 3 and 4 tend to focus upon fundamental differences in relation to the progression of the care plan and drift within that process, the progression of our young people to semi-independent living and the support which is wrapped around such a move and delays in the progression of SGO's and child arrangement orders.

9.9 The thematic headline messages from the Q and C audits are as follows:

- pre meeting reports not prepared for the LAC review, reports not shared with parents and young people,
- insufficient direct work undertaken with young people,
- lack of management oversight recorded,
- disputes about the frequency of supervision,
- managerial oversight of the decisions and recommendations of the review,
- no up to date care plan and little evidence of review and progression of this plan,
- Where the Q and C's are graded Good or Requires improvement, there is good evidence of frequent supervision and managerial oversight, decisions made in timely ways and any delay gripped and actioned, the voice of the child is paramount and informs the care planning process, contingency plans are evident and good interagency working informs assessments and plans.

10. Supervision of the IRO's

10.1 There is a permanent Service Manager for the IRO service who has been in post since April 2018. All IRO's have monthly supervision in addition to an open door policy in terms of practice issues. A new supervision template has been designed which focuses on performance issues whilst encompassing the signs of safety agenda. Supervision is now themed each month to ensure that IRO's have grip and act with pace in order to drive forward care plans. Since April there has been a focus on those children in residential care, those whose plan is for permanency, and those young people between 15 and 17 who are moving onto semi-independent living. All the IRO's have had a PDR for 2018.

10.2 The Service Manager for the IRO service also has line management of the Advocacy and Independent Visitor service and the IRO for fostering. This equates to 15 direct reports. In terms of the provision of supervision for the Advocacy service, the development of group supervision in line with our restorative practice agenda will be our focus for the next year, with additional team management support.

11. The Challenge and Escalation Process (Formally the Dispute resolution process – DRP)

11.1 A review of the Dispute resolution process for IRO's and Escalation process for conference chairs found that issues were raised around compliance but there needed to be a greater emphasis on the overarching needs and outcomes for the young people we work with. Changes in the level of management also meant that the stages of the Dispute Process needed to also be reviewed. As a result in September 2016 the DRP process for IRO's and Escalation process for CC's became the Challenge and Escalation process. The emphasis remains on offering high challenge and acknowledges that Escalation is needed to progress cases where things cannot be resolved, but the focus was also around not just considering compliance but consider the outcomes and impacts and if these were being achieved for our young people. This united formal process for IRO's and CP Conference Chair's reflects the drive to ensure that there is a clear and consistent evaluation of the impact of the services and interventions we provide for our most vulnerable children and young people. The key aim is to ensure the outcome for the child is the key focus and that any barriers to this are raised, where needed at the most senior points in the authority and if required via CAFCASS and the Court process for IRO's.

11.2 In Rotherham this means:

The stages reflect the level of management where the concerns are raised and the identified response time.

- Stage 1 - IRO to Team manager (1 day to respond)
- Stage 2 - Ops manager for IRO's to Service manager (5 days)
- Stage 3 - Head of Service for Safeguarding to Head of Service (4 days)
- Stage 4 - Head of Service Safeguarding to Deputy Director / Director (5 days)
- Stage 5 – Referral to CAFCASS

11.3 The process should provide for no more than 20 working days, to resolve the issue. In practice however it can take longer due to the complexity of the issues raised via the process.

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4	Contact with CAFCASS
April 2017	23	5	1	1	0
May 17	29	4	3	0	0
June 17	28	3	6	0	0
July 17	42	1	7	2	0
August 17	32	2	0	3	0
September 17	20	1	0	0	0
October 17	23	1	0	0	0
November 17	18	1	0	0	0
December 17	12	0	0	0	0
January 18	15	0	0	0	0
February 18	10	0	0	0	0
March 18	25	2	2	0	0
Total	277	20	19	6	0

11.4 The above table reflects that stage 2 escalations remain high but there is a very clear reduction from September. Of significance is that the stability in the CIC workforce has become much more apparent to the IRO service from May 2017 and the lower level of stage 1's and Inadequate QAC's for September 2017, combined with a sustained strong Requires Improvement cohort, potentially reflects the impact of this for the children reviewed, recognising that supporting change for this group of young people is not always immediate and needs to be sustained to show an impact for a child. There has also been a reduction on the theme around changes in social worker and management supervision becoming much less apparent.

11.5 The main issues that have been raised in stages 1, 2, 3 and 4 of the escalation process have related to the following issues, which seem to be ongoing themes for the year.

- Quality and clarity of care plan
- Concern around delay in legal care plans and the lack of final evidence and care plans being discussed with the IRO,
- Some Decisions and recommendations from reviews not being acted upon and no robust mechanism in place where decisions made at reviews are not agreed by the LAC/locality service.
- Concerns around the regulation of placement with parents and management of risk related to this
- Lack of appropriate education provision
- Concern around placement suitability.
- Concerns re transition to adults services
- Issues around contact that need to be addressed
- Impact of changes of social worker on planning
- Provision of service – access to records

11.6 A key area of focus is on improving the quality of care plans. While some plans are excellent and use the voice of the child to evidence the outcomes identified, this is not consistent across the service. As a key document that supports and defines the outcomes for children we need to ensure this a key area of development work with our field work Team Manager and Social workers.

11.7 A positive progression has been around the confidence that the IRO service has and support from senior management to raise issues at a more strategic level. This is evidenced in the table above with an increase over the last 12 months through the increase in stage 4's. The key themes raised have been linked to placement sufficiency and suitability for some of our most vulnerable young people with the most complex level of need. This includes issues around transition and also around ensuring the right legal status and support is in place. The escalation is tracked until addressed and IROs display tenacity around retaining oversight until the outcome is achieved. Senior Leadership have been clear in ensuring that while restorative conversations can happen, they want to be sighted on key barriers and this commitment has supported a focus.

11.8 These figures do not reflect the full extent of the work done by IROs to flag up issues as part of the regular preparation before reviews. Intervening early and monitoring between the reviews ensures that routine issues are resolved in a timely manner and before the reviews take place.

12. Identifying good practice and problem resolution :

12.1 Of note, IRO's have noted improvements in relation to the timeliness of visits the increase the quality of contact between children, young people and their allocated Social Workers and completion of Personal Education Plans. Supervision and management oversight has also been much more prevalent on files and is clearly supporting the development of better social work practice.

12.2 A further significant shift over the past 5 month has been a reduction in issues around staffing changes and management oversight. Escalations around this have reduced and the vast majority are around ensuring plans are around ensuring plans are progressed and placements offer the right level of support to match children's current and future needs. IRO's continue to be clear they are not decision makers but that play a pivotal role in ensuring decisions are well evidenced and that assessments reflected needs of children and place them at the heart of what we do.

13. Feedback from Practice Observations of each IRO

13.1 Since the permanent service manager was appointed in April 2018, each IRO has been observed chairing a review. This practice will be undertaken at least once a year. In terms of practice, the following themes have been identified:

- IRO's are authoritative in reviews,
- IRO's complete a quality audit before each review and prepares fully for each review,
- IRO's communication with children and young people is good and they participate in their reviews when they attend.
- There is challenge within reviews from IRO's.
- IRO's are inclusive of parents, carers, professionals and children within those reviews,
- Our focus over the coming months needs to be the cultural embedding of visits to children prior to a review and how we communicate with those children who are placed at a distance in residential care. A clear focus will be using this contact to make a difference in having the child's voice heard in their review and care plan

14. Any resource issues putting at risk the delivery of quality services to our Looked After Children

14.1 At the time of writing, Rotherham Children services has 650 looked after children. This is higher than our South Yorkshire neighbouring Local Authority's in Sheffield, Barnsley and Doncaster. Rotherham has 9 permanent IRO's and 1 agency IRO therefore most caseloads are between 74 and 79. This is higher than the recommended caseload specified in the statutory guidance for IRO's of between 50 and 70.

14.2 The IRO team has been through a challenging year but with the addition of a permanent Service Manager, there is a real drive to effect strategic and practice change and embed the IRO footprint, however, there are real barriers to ensuring that our footprint is embedded consistency across the service given the continuing rise on our looked after population.

15. Strategic and Practice Influence of the IRO Service:

15.1 Within Rotherham, there are cultural changes that are needed to ensure that the IRO service is better embedded within the fabric of the organisation. There are a number of initiatives which ensure that our strategic footprint is integral to our corporate parenting overview:

- The IRO Service Manager sits on and is an integral part of Residential placement panel which monitors our children's placements and more recently sits on the Public Law Outline panel which gate keeps the initiation of legal proceedings for children's services. In addition, the Service Manager is part of the group who is responsible for the MST – FIT initiative.
- The IRO Service Manager will attend one LAC performance meeting a month to ensure that issues from IRO performance meetings are disseminated amongst practitioners and drive quality and performance.
- Formal links are being developed between the IRO Service Manager and the Commissioning team within children's services to review the quality of placement provision for the younger children who are placed within a residential unit. There is a check and challenge function which reviews the effectiveness of the IRO overview in such circumstances.
- The development of a suite of IRO performance data that specifically relates to the IRO service supports themes from the quality audits undertaken before each review in order to drive practice within LAC and locality services. This will link into monthly meetings with Service Managers for LAC and Locality in order to discuss practice gaps, drive timely permanency planning and ensure that the right child has the right care.
- In terms of strategic drive, the IRO service is able to report directly into the Senior Management Team and Director Leadership team meetings in terms of practice challenges for the coming year.
- The Link team initiative will start to embed good practice in terms of the review planning process for children and the presence of IRO's within those link teams at times of the month will strengthen the communication between IRO's and social workers and team managers ensuring that there is better resolution of issues when they arise and the development of the role of the IRO as a critical friend.

16. Challenges ahead:

16.1 Based on the data and issues raised from the IRO's, the main issues for Corporate Parents in the coming year are the following:

- i) Rising numbers of looked after children. At the time of writing Rotherham Council is corporate parent to 650 children and young people.
- ii) The efficiency of Early Help services, including the Edge of Care team in preventing the movement of children into Children's Services.
- iii) The effectiveness of the Duty Service within Children's Services, to anchor threshold for legal proceedings and to embed front loading into practice in terms of working family genograms.
- iv) Placement pressures. The stock of foster carers needs to increase. This has two unintended consequences; the increased use of placing children within residential units when their care plan is foster care and the adjournment of court proceedings at the initial hearing if a placement cannot be guaranteed.
- v) The reduction and eradication of residential placements for children under the age of 12 years old.
- vi) The development of cultural changes within the Local Authority in terms of the IRO role to a place where they are viewed as the critical friend and advocate footprint for the child or young person.
- vii) The movement of our young people into semi-independent living, the support which is provided and the planning which is needed to enable our young people to thrive in independent living. How can we replicate the family support for our young people, which we would provide for our own children?

17. Annual work programme and areas for development for the IRO service between April 2018 and March 2019:

17.1 There are a number of priorities for the IRO service over the next 12 months.

- **To continue to build on the performance framework for IRO's to provide a clearer oversight of the challenge that the IRO service offers and to link this into the LAC performance meetings. Timescale – implemented.**

A performance framework has been developed and set up for the IRO service. This is based on the model of performance meetings which is prominent and key within other areas of Children's services. Performance meetings are held monthly and IRO's produce a report on a monthly basis which feeds into that meeting which focuses on the performance data including reports within timescales, escalations raised with social care,

themes from quality and compliance forms completed before each review and minutes undertaken within timescales. Over the next 12 months, this will be embedded to ensure that each IRO owns their own performance data and is more able therefore to address gaps within children's care planning.

- **To continue to develop the role of the IRO service to prioritise the timely Permanence Planning for children by ensuring that this is explicit in their responsibilities.**

Timescale – 8 weeks

The development of themed supervision to ensure that each child with a plan of permanency is formulated at the first review and grip and pace becomes embedded practice within this area. This will ensure that our children are moved onto permanency in a more timely way.

- **To enable children and young people to chair and co participate in their own reviews.**

Timescales – 2 months

- **To formulate and embed the Signs of Safety agenda within children and young people's reviews.**

Timescales – 2months

- **Progression of Link teams.**

Timescales – implemented.

To ensure that good practice and standards are consistently evident within Looked after and locality teams, the Link Teams format ensures that each team within Children's Services has a named IRO who will drive good practice based on the IRO handbook.

- **To embed the Challenge and Escalation process in Liquid Logic to ensure that disputes and challenges to children's care plans are managed with grip and pace.**

Timescales – 3 months

- **Further embed the IRO footprint onto child's files. This includes visits to children prior to their review, midway reviews to ensure that children and young people's care plans have clear trajectory and pace and clear, concise case recordings of IRO activity which relates to impact analysis and better outcomes for our children.**

- **Working collaboratively with social work locality and Looked after children's teams to ensure that the "Right Child, Right care" agenda is embedded. This will ensure that the right permanency plan is progressed with the right oversight by the IRO service.**

- **Working with social work teams to reduce the need to place children within residential establishments unless there is a sound impact/outcomes based rationale.**

- **Work to ensure that the basics are done right and done well including ensuring that reviews are undertaken within timescales, maximise the contribution of parents and carers in reviews, that quality audits are undertaken prior to each review and team managers and social workers act upon those audits and minutes are distributed within 20 working days of the review.**

Tracey Arnold,
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