

HAMPSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Report

Panel:	Children and Families Advisory Panel
Date:	9 February 2021
Title:	Independent Reviewing Service Annual Report 2019/20
Report From:	Director of Children's Services

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1. Purpose of this Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide the annual update on the work of the Independent Reviewing Service (IRS) in Hampshire.
- 1.2 This annual report covers the period from 1 July 2019 to 31 July 2020

2. Recommendation

- 2.1. That the Children and Families Advisory Panel note this report on the annual work of the Independent Reviewing Service.

3. Executive Summary

- 3.1 This annual report summarises the work of the Independent Reviewing Service (IRS) in line with the key areas specified in statutory guidance. It identifies areas of good practice and the positive response of the service to the Covid-19 challenges. The IRS has contributed to the transformation and development work taking place across the department, including the embedding of the Hampshire Approach. This report also acknowledges the areas for further development of the service in the future, most notably, the improvement of the IRS quality assurance to evidence the impact on outcomes for children.

4. Contextual information

- 4.1 The appointment of an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) for a child or young person in the care of the Local Authority is a legal requirement under s.118 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002.
- 4.2 The IRO Handbook, issued in March 2010, provides Local Authorities with statutory guidance on how IROs should discharge their duties. The guidance confirms that the primary role of an IRO is: *to ensure that the care plan for the child fully reflects the child's current needs and that the actions set out in the plan are consistent with the local authority's legal responsibilities towards the child* (at para. 2.10)
- 4.3 The IRO Handbook states that the IRO manager should be responsible for producing an annual report for the scrutiny of the members of the Corporate Parenting Board. The IRO Handbook specifies six areas that an annual report should reference. They are as follows:
- Development of the IRO service including information on caseloads, continuity of employment, the profile of the team and how it reflects the identity of the children it is serving
 - Number of reviews that are held on time, the number that are held out of time and the reasons for the ones that are out of time
 - Extent of participation of children and their parents
 - Outcomes of quality assurance audits in relation to the organisation, conduct and recording of reviews
 - Procedures for resolving concerns, including the local dispute resolution process, an analysis of the issues raised in dispute and the outcomes
 - Whether there are any resource issues risk the delivery of a quality service to all looked after children.
- 4.4 In Hampshire, the role of the IRO also includes the function of independent Chair of child protection conferences.
- 4.5 By way of context and background, at the end of January 2019, the number of full-time Children Looked After (CLA) in Hampshire was 1,677. At the end of January 2020 this figure was 1,600 which represents a 4.81% decrease. During the same period, the number of children subject

to a Child Protection (CP) Plan decreased by 269 from 1,204 to 935 at the end of January 2020. This represents a 22% decrease. In terms of activity for the period covered by this report, 2,400 CP conferences were chaired and 4,719 CLA reviews were undertaken between 1 July 2019 and 31 July 2020 (for full-time CLA and including Statutory Reviews and Statutory Adoption Reviews).

- 4.6 There are, therefore, some clear indications that the ongoing programme of transformation in children's social care over recent years is having an impact on the number of children being able to remain safely at home within their families and communities. The emphasis within this programme on reunification and permanence, and the application of strength-based family work initiatives (including multi-disciplinary specialist and intensive workers within social work teams) indicates positive outcomes with regards to the number of children in care and on child protection plans. The IRS continues to focus on ensuring reunification is achieved in the safest and most timely way, including examining how the service can develop their own strength-based practice to ensure continuity of experience for young people and their families. The full impact of the Covid-19 pandemic is yet to be fully understood on demand for children's social care, but there is clear evidence of a rise in both child protection and children looked after as a result.

5. Development of the IRO service, including, information on caseloads, continuity of employment, the profile of the team and how it reflects the identity of the children it is serving.

- 5.1 There are currently 23.5 full time equivalent (FTE) IRO posts, line managed on an area basis (East and West) by two Lead IROs.
- 5.2 In the East, staffing has been stable with the one vacancy arising being filled following recruitment. Sadly, a valued IRO colleague died in service during March 2020 unexpectedly. This had a significant impact on the IRS and wider service as well as with young people and foster carers that we worked with. Support has been provided by the Lead IROs to affected staff and families.
- 5.3 In the West two IROs (1.5 FTE) were on maternity leave for a period, therefore one FTE agency IRO was approved to provide cover whose contract is currently being reviewed on a three-monthly basis. A temporary FTE has also been recruited; initially for 12 months but this has been extended for a further 6 months. The West has seen two FTE leave the Service; their posts have now been filled. In addition, there was some planned sickness leave totalling ten weeks from two IROs over summer/autumn 2019.

- 5.4 The Lead IRO West, who had been in post for three years left the IRS at the end of June 2020; this position was successfully recruited to without a gap.
- 5.5 The IRS service continues to use casually employed Child Protection Conference Chairs. The service employs eight casual chairs who have been vital in ensuring we deliver an effective and flexible service with the ability to be agile in meeting variations in demand. This allows the service to maintain the focus of the IRO role for allocation to our Looked After Children to ensure the statutory obligation in respect of that provision is protected and met.
- 5.6 Average FTE caseloads for IROs in Hampshire is 83 which includes both children looked after and child protection conferences. There was a slow and steady reduction at the end of 2019/beginning of 2020 with the numbers on child protection plans decreasing. However, IRO caseloads have been impacted in the main by gaps in the recruitment process (i.e., the amount of time it takes to recruit between staff leaving and joining the service). CP Conference Chair responsibilities are held in addition to the IRO role in Hampshire. It is noted that the statutory guidance, within the IRO Handbook, recommends a caseload of 50-70 looked after children for a full-time equivalent IRO. Nationally these figures vary across authorities. The service is working hard to robustly manage the caseloads of IROs through regular monitoring (reporting monthly to the DCS) and Lead IROs are overseeing throughput and ensuring a drive and focus on reunification where appropriate.
- 5.7 A review of the service, undertaken as part of the Transforming Social Care programme, has just begun. This will seek to understand demand and workload and ensure appropriate and efficient use of resource. It will identify improvements to enhance and develop service quality, performance and most importantly, impact. The IRS is positive about this review and looking forward to identifying and owning improvements as a result.
- 5.8 The majority (83.5%) of children in Care in Hampshire are White British, this being reflected by the makeup of the cohort of IROs within the IRS service. Seven IROs are male and 17 are female, with the majority being White British, one IRO is Black/Caribbean.
- 5.9 In March 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in wide-ranging restrictions across the country and, as with all aspects of children's social care, impacted directly on the work of the IRS in Hampshire. Local offices were closed, with staff, partners and children and families unable to meet face-to-face for conferences or reviews. As with the rest of the branch, work continued with business as usual whilst doing things differently. In response to these challenges the IRS service worked closely with social

care teams and partners to develop processes that meant CP conferences and CLA reviews could be held virtually. Within 48 hours of lockdown, staff implemented the use of MS Teams to ensure service continuity. To ensure agency decision making is clear, each partner agency submits their decision and analysis via an email following each conference. These submissions are recorded on the child's electronic record by the CP chair along with their Chair's summary. This gives a clear record of decision making to be captured if the recording quality is reduced in a small number of cases due to internet connection.

- 5.10 Participation of parents and agencies have improved greatly since working virtually and consideration will be given about the use of virtual and hybrid meetings following the ease of Covid-19 restrictions due to its success. Another positive is that adjourned and cancelled conferences have remained very low in numbers since Covid-19.
- 5.11 Children have reported that they have liked the use of MS Teams or WhatsApp. IROs have reported that they have seen some improvement in children participating in their CLA reviews although this is dependent on their ages and understanding. The IRS service will be undertaking a Participation Audit in the autumn to establish how the use of MS Teams/WhatsApp has impacted on children's engagement within their reviews.

6. Number of reviews that are held on time, the number that are held out of time and the reasons for the ones that are out of time

- 6.1 CLA Review timeliness for the rolling year to date at the end of July 2020 was 71.8%; a decrease from 81.2% in July 2019. The results between 2019 and 2018 are similar at 82.6%. This decrease in CLA Review timeliness performance has not been a feature in previous years. An investigation was undertaken by the Lead IROs with local managers and it was established that this was a data issue relating to counting errors in the West; this has since been corrected which improved the performance to the county total of 78.6% rolling year and 91.6% statutory year to date.

7. Extent of participation of children and their parents

- 7.1 Child participation in CP conferences was the subject of a separate report considered by CFMT in October 2019, which was then presented within the Hampshire Safeguarding Children Partnership. In headline, overall and across several key areas audited, performance was better than the September 2017 audit.
- 7.2 Fifteen children (14.9%) over the age of 10 years attended their conference during the participation audit; all met with the chair prior to the

meeting and 14 also had prior preparation with the Social Worker. However, the Participation audit report highlighted that of the 85.1% of the children who did not attend their conference, the majority had their wishes and feelings represented. The child's wishes, and feelings were expressly referenced in 97% of cases from social work reports. Conference chairs were confident that in 81.2% of cases their outline and child protection plans were informed by the child's wishes and feelings. Only 3% of children submitted a document to conference whereby their feelings were recorded independently. Improvements have been sustained, but further work is needed to embed participation rather than using the representation of a child's views as the norm. The annual Care Plan audit further considers the issue of participation in CLA planning processes.

8. Outcomes of quality assurance audits in relation to the organisation, conduct and recording of reviews

- 8.1 A repeat audit of agency participation in, and report contribution to, CP conferences was conducted for a week starting 23rd September 2019. Local CP administrators in each district answered key questions for each conference held that week. Headlines from this snapshot of practice include that multi agency engagement, as part of the CP conference process, showed an increase in attendance from the previous audit. In terms of report submission, the sharing of these reports with the conference chair and families concerned had declined. Data shows only 61% of invitations result in the attendance of a professional at the conference.
- 8.2 School and school nursing service engagement improved significantly and contributed to the overall increase in attendance and conference quoracy had been significantly supported by colleagues from these services and from colleagues in health visiting and Police. The agencies whose contribution to the process needed greater consideration included GPs with regards to report submission, midwifery and other agencies not routinely invited but who are attending less often such as probation. These matters have been discussed with the relevant heads of service and within the Hampshire Safeguarding Children Partnership to establish the barriers of non-attendance and actions to increase participation.
- 8.3. Since Covid-19 and working virtually Child Protection chairs report participation and attendance from all agencies has been greatly improved. A Participation Audit will be undertaken in the autumn to establish the extent of this.
- 8.4 As part of the work in developing the Hampshire Approach, during last year, the CP plan template has been revised in line with our strength-based model and renamed the Family Plan. The CLA review record

template has been changed from August 2020 to make them more child friendly. Lead IROs are also revising their audit tool in line with the Quality Assurance Framework which will capture the impact of the IRO. Over the next twelve months we are developing and planning a schedule of LIRO and IRO auditing of work to capture the impact and outcomes.

- 8.5 Procedures for resolving concerns, including the local dispute resolution process and an analysis of the issues raised in dispute and the outcomes
- 8.6 The formal Problem Resolution Process (PRP) was commenced seven times by four different IROs in the year to July 2019 to July 2020 all were resolved at district manager level. This is a low return when compared to previous years as 23 were commenced in 2018. IROs have stated that their relationships with team managers are positive and issues are generally being resolved at the informal level without the use of PRPs. To capture this improvement the IRS service are working with the C2C team to ensure that we can collate this data in the new Mosaic system that is currently being developed.
- 8.7 Triggers for escalation include non-completion of review decisions, lack of school placement, non-completion of placement at home regulations and no health assessment. The IRS was part of the multi-agency Rapid Improvement Event planned in September 2020 on health assessments of children who are looked after.

9. Any resource issues putting at risk the delivery of a quality service to all looked after children

- 9.1 In light of the work within Hampshire to promote the resilience of families and keep more children safely at home, the overarching strategy has seen a gradual reduction in the number of children being looked after and a decrease in children on child protection plans since November 2018, thus reducing the demands on the IRS. However, the increase in demand on social care because of the coronavirus pandemic, and the expected pressures going into the autumn is reversing that trend.
- 9.2 IROs have all been asked to identify children on their caseloads who should be achieving their 'right to private and family life' to confirm they are robust in ensuring the plan is realised without drift or unnecessary delay and by use of formal resolution if appropriate. Within supervision IROs are asked to highlight progress in these cases. This has led to progress being made in permanence planning.
- 9.3 The main challenge in ensuring delivery of an outstanding reviewing service remains the consistency and management of IRO caseloads, particularly considering the potential increased demand on social care as

a result of Covid-19. A further challenge is developing the evidence of the impact of the IRS on children's records from our IT system. However, work is underway as part of the Transforming Social Care programme to review the effectiveness of the service and how it can adapt and flex to meet the challenges going forward, utilising its resource as efficiently as possible.

10. Good Practice

- 10.1 Led by the Lead IROs, the IRS has been fully involved and contributed to the work and development of the Hampshire Approach, particularly in respect of new recording formats to be used for care planning, CLA review and CP conferences. There have been some significant benefits of working virtually for the IRS, and as the IRS service progresses through its transformation review these benefits will be considered for future ways of working within the service.
- 10.2 Lead IROs have led work with the IROs to develop a new process for holding CP conferences. The aim is to improve information sharing and parental/carer participation and to strengthen the planning process. Covid-19 has impacted on the further development of this process with a wider staff group, but it will be incorporated and progressed within the work being undertaken on Family Meetings. The service has made some inroads into developing better processes to ensure midway review points between statutory CLA reviews are better recognised and acted on. Over the next few months this will be embedded into practice.
- 10.3 As well as their statutory role in challenge, IROs regularly note and informally reflect examples of good practice in relation to front-line social work and feed this back to practitioners and their managers. At the request of a district manager, care planning training and support is being developed and delivered by IROs to support practitioners.
- 10.4 Lead IROs continue to input into district PAGs using an agreed data set and analysis format and now attend County PAG to present a monthly IRO performance report. They attend local management meetings in districts as appropriate.
- 10.5 IROs visit and offer support to social work teams to support practice and build positive professional relationships. Each IRO is linked to a team to enable this, they attend the link team meetings on a quarterly basis. This enables case progression discussions to be more effective. This work is currently being undertaken virtually.

11. Areas for further development

11.1 Use of MS Teams has been working well for both Child Protection Conferences and looked after children reviews. The following actions were agreed by the Children and Families Management Team:

- The Care Plan Audit will be further refined and repeated ensuring that it is both quantitative and qualitative. CFMT is asked to take a view on the timing of the next audit in the context of the My Life My Future Care Plan format having just been launched.
- A format for CLA review minutes written 'to the child' has been agreed and its use will be embedded in IRO practice from 24 August 2020.
- The service will engage with and contribute to Partners in Practice sector led improvement work with other local authorities as appropriate and is currently involved in workstreams with two Local Authorities.
- The IRS will continue to remain updated with the developing work in the department, specialist inputs to service meetings, contribution to process and form developments and participation in training where possible. This will include the recent corporate and branch focus on inclusion and diversity, initially in response to Black Lives Matters.
- LIROs will ensure the issues of performance in relation to timeliness and participation are monitored, addressed and improvement is made where necessary.
- The IRS service will consider the use of and incorporate MS Teams for future service delivery where appropriate.
- The IRS service will participate in the IRS Service Review from July 2020.

12. Conclusion

12.1 The IRS has continued to deliver a good quality service in the last 12 months whilst managing the significant impact of Covid-19, working virtually and staff resourcing.

REQUIRED CORPORATE AND LEGAL INFORMATION:

Links to the Strategic Plan

Hampshire maintains strong and sustainable economic growth and prosperity:	no
People in Hampshire live safe, healthy and independent lives:	yes
People in Hampshire enjoy a rich and diverse environment:	no
People in Hampshire enjoy being part of strong, inclusive communities:	no

Section 100 D - Local Government Act 1972 - background documents

The following documents discuss facts or matters on which this report, or an important part of it, is based and have been relied upon to a material extent in the preparation of this report. (NB: the list excludes published works and any documents which disclose exempt or confidential information as defined in the Act.)

Document

Location

None

EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT:

1. Equality Duty

The County Council has a duty under Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 ('the Act') to have due regard in the exercise of its functions to the need to:

- Eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation and any other conduct prohibited by or under the Act with regard to the protected characteristics as set out in section 4 of the Act (age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation);
- Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic within section 149(7) of the Act (age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation) and those who do not share it;
- Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic within section 149(7) of the Act (see above) and persons who do not share it.

Due regard in this context involves having due regard in particular to:

- The need to remove or minimise disadvantages suffered by persons sharing a relevant protected characteristic that are connected to that characteristic;
- Take steps to meet the needs of persons sharing a relevant protected characteristic that are different from the needs of persons who do not share it;
- Encourage persons sharing a relevant protected characteristic to participate in public life or in any other activity in which participation by such persons is disproportionately low.

2. Equalities Impact Assessment:

This report provides an update on the overall work of the Independent Reviewing Service and is not proposing changes that would lead to an impact on groups with protected characteristics.