

Independent Reviewing Officers Annual Report 2015 - 2016 Looked After Children and Safeguarding

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Lancashire Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Service

- Lancashire has had an IRO service since 1999
- IROs are responsible for chairing children looked after reviews, child protection conferences and a range of specialist strategy meetings
- The IROs primary focus is to quality assure the care planning and review process for each child and challenge in order to improve care planning and secure better outcomes
- Since January 2016 the IRO Service has undertaken Regulation 44 visits for Lancashire's residential establishments for children and young people ensuring greater independence within this process

IRO Service Structure

- Head of Service: Sally Allen
- Safeguarding Manager
- 6.5 Quality and Review Managers
- 45 IROs, There was an increase in IROs from 30 to 45 FTE posts during 2015/2016
- The service mirrors the locality footprint of Children's Social Care. There are two IRO teams in the Central locality, 3 teams in the East and 1.5 teams in the North. This helps to strengthen local relationships whilst also improving consistency of practice and challenge

Challenges during 2014/2015

- IRO quality assurance of S.47 enquiries
- Increase in the number of children subject to a child protection plan which at the end of March 2015 was 956 children, however, in March 2016 this had increased by 55% to 1,443
- The number of children looked after has increased by 3% from 1,626 in March 2015 to 1,674 in March 2016.
- Ofsted found that IROs do not consistently monitor children's cases to ensure they are receiving the services they need and that their plans are progressing as agreed

Challenges during 2015/2016

- Recruitment and retention of permanent IROs resulting in the use of agency staff (50%). Re-grade inline with statistical neighbours
- Evidencing IRO footprint on all children's case records including evidence of challenge and impact of IRO involvement
- Embedding a revised Problem Resolution Protocol in practice
- IRO practice standards to ensure consistency within the service
- Reducing IRO caseloads
- Lack of data to inform changes to practice

Progress on Recommendations from 2014/2015

- Ofsted Identified that caseloads were too high (IRO handbook identifies (50-70 for CLA cases). The average IRO caseload in April 2016 was 82 compared with 109 (high of 130) at the end of March 2015
- There is some evidence of IRO quality assurance of practice within informal and formal resolution. However, the service recognises this is still an area of improvement
- The reduction in caseloads since the recruitment of additional IROs to the service has led to a significant increase in the completion of mid-point checks.

Progress on Recommendations from 2014/2015

- Elements of success with informal and formal problem resolution
- IROs have worked to develop strong positive relationships with children's services and quarterly liaison meetings
- Changes to the children's electronic recording system (LCS) to improve data collection on mid-point checks, informal resolution, section 47 audits
- Performance in relation to participation of children looked after in either attending or contributing to their review remains high. In 2014/15 the participation of children looked after was 92.5%. This has increased to 95.9% during 2015-16.

Priorities for 2016-17

- Recruit appropriately skilled and experienced staff on a permanent basis to all IRO and Quality & Review Manager vacancies
- Ensure there is evidence of the IRO foot-print in the child's case record and that the impact of the IRO in improving outcomes for the child is clearly visible
- Quality & Review Managers to ensure caseloads are equitable across the IRO Service
- IROs to undertake robust quality assurance of practice to ensure there is a chronology, up to date child & family assessment that provides an analysis of risk and that plans are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and have clear timescales
- Enhancement to be made to LCS to improve the quality of recording of mid-point checks and to ensure a consistent approach

Priorities for 2016-17

- Embed the Audit Framework within the IRO Service and ensure audits are of a consistently high standard to promote learning
- Quality & Review Managers to audit cases where the child protection plan has been ceased at the first review child protection conference. Sample audit to be undertaken of repeat child protection plans to quality assure decision making
- Review the system for the quality assurance of S.47 enquiries by IROs
- IROs to gather evidence of permanence achieved for children looked after at their second (four month) review and ensure this is recorded within the IRO outcome report
- Quality & Review Managers to review and plan audit activity for the service in the forthcoming year. This will include attendance at core group meetings, multi-agency attendance and participation at child protection conferences and child protection plans ceased at the first review conference
- Quality & Review Managers to review the mechanisms used for seeking feedback in relation to the views of children, families and professionals

Priorities for 2016-17

- Embed the revised Problem Resolution Protocol in practice
- Develop IRO practice standards to ensure consistency within the service
- Quality & Review Managers to monitor the performance of the IRO Service, permanence, mid-point checks, IRO quality assurance of S.47 enquiries, informal/formal resolution processes to further improve performance in these areas
- Quality & Review Managers to ensure a consistent approach across the IRO Service in the completion of Regulation 44 visits of Lancashire's in-house residential children's homes