

NORTH LINCOLNSHIRE COUNCIL

CABINET

INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICERS (IRO) SERVICE ANNUAL REPORT

1. OBJECT AND KEY POINTS IN THIS REPORT

- 1.1 To present the Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) annual report to Cabinet.

2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 2.1 The IRO Handbook 2010 provides statutory guidance to IROs about how they should discharge their distinct responsibilities to looked after children. It also provides guidance to local authorities on their strategic and managerial responsibilities in establishing an effective IRO service. The aim is to give all looked after children the support and services that each one requires to enable them to reach their potential and to achieve improved outcomes for children. The IRO Handbook states that the IRO manager should be responsible for the production of an annual report for the scrutiny of the members of the corporate parenting board.
- 2.2 North Lincolnshire has maintained a low number of children in care and remains lower than statistical neighbours and the England average. There were 165 children and young people in full-time care as at the end of March 2013. In addition, there were 5 children in short-break care under section 20 and 6 young people aged 16 and 17 “relevant” care leavers whose pathway plans were independently reviewed.

The average IRO caseload was 59 cases in 2012/13. The IRO Handbook states that an estimated caseload of between 50 to 70 children for a full time IRO would represent good practice in the delivery of a quality service.

Looked after children reviews held within timescale for 2012/13 was 100% for children in full-time care, short-break care and for “relevant” young people with pathway plans.

Through a range of methods, 100% of children/young people both in full-time and short break care and those with a pathway plan participated in their review during the year.

2.3 There has been robust management oversight into the organisation, conduct and recording of reviews. This has incorporated oversight of cases, IRO allocation and administrative systems, frameworks including monthly outcomes meetings to monitor and evaluate the conduct of reviews and IRO effectiveness, IRO observation, case file audits and views and feedback from children, young people, their parents and carers.

There has been a longstanding history of the IRO Service gathering, collating, analysing and taking action and making improvements from the “review views” of children, young people and their parents/carers which has existed for over five years. From April 2012 to March 2013 100% of children and young people who fed back after their review said that they:-

- were given time to speak to their IRO before their review
- were able to give their views in their review meeting
- understood and agreed with the planning for them
- had the right people invited
- knew how to make a complaint.

This is impressive feedback and reflects the strong practice of effective engagement and collaboration with children and young people and including them in decision-making.

During the year 100% of parents who fed back said that they:-

- were able to give their views during the review or did not wish to give a view
- understood what was agreed about their child’s care plan.

In terms of improvements, it was found that these were understandably in the area of individual children’s care plans where alternative permanency was being proposed and this was discussed further with them to ensure that through sustained conversations they were more enabled to have a greater understanding of the explanation and where necessary further support was recommended. In all cases the IRO Service considered that the care plans presented at these reviews were the right plans in the best interests of the child. The feedback from parents shows that they are involved in the care planning for their children and assisted to come to terms with difficult situations.

2.4 The Care Planning Dispute Resolution Policy outlines that a key function of the IRO is to resolve problems arising out of the care planning process. Within North Lincolnshire IRO’s have established collaborative and challenging working relationships with social workers and their managers. In very few cases the IRO had raised an issue relating to care planning. Solutions had been expedited in all cases with no cases being taken up to the level of senior management. There has been no referral to Cafcass.

2.5 Services for children in care are a North Lincolnshire Council priority. The Council demonstrates a genuine commitment to children, front line service delivery and the finance to support this within the 2012 – 2015 budget programme. North Lincolnshire Council has invested in family based care,

supported accommodation, adoption and a range of support services which include a growing role for the voluntary sector and a commitment to build a new Children's Campus to transform provision for looked after children.

- 2.6 Social workers in North Lincolnshire benefit from a Workforce Plan that includes relevant training and development opportunities for becoming capable and knowledgeable when working with children and families. Training, such as court skills, attachment, life story work, preparing reports for the adoption panel, neglect and child sexual exploitation, helps develop the contemporary knowledge, skills and expertise in working with children in care.
- 2.7 There is high quality participation with looked after children and young people at the individual, service and strategic levels which continues to be an outstanding feature. The views and voices of looked after children and young people in North Lincolnshire are actively sought through many methods during their time in care and after they have left care. A Partnership and Collaboration Report has been produced quarterly, outlining events and activities involving children and young people and their key messages from the array of participation methods such as the work of the Children in Care Council, Children's Homes Children's Meetings, Review Views, Exit Interviews (for children/young people changing placements or leaving care) and the involvement of the Children and Young Person's Advocate.
- 2.8 Corporate Parents have demonstrated an excellent commitment to dialogue with children in care. They have continued to use a Creative Conversation model with the Children in Care Council on a quarterly basis. This has enabled children and young people to meet with senior managers and Members, including the Lead Member for People and the Director of People to discuss important issues through child/young person friendly means, for example the "hot seat" where two minutes are given to answer questions. The conversations also provide an opportunity to feedback performance information and progress on developments whilst being embedded in fun activities such as bowling and playing games. Topics discussed have included education, employment opportunities and leisure. Actions taken have included a reading initiative with the Library service and the establishment of posts within that service for looked after children and care leavers, apprenticeship opportunities and support for the cycle club and the end-to-end cycle ride.
- 2.9 The North Lincolnshire Children and Young People's Plan 2010 - 13 identified children in care and care leavers as priority groups for support. This continues to be the case for 2013 -15 and will be reflected through a similar commitment by the Health and Wellbeing Board.

The Review of the Children and Young People in Care Strategy 2011 – 2013 reflects on the improvements and developments for children in care and care leavers by the Council and as a partnership to achieve positive outcomes through shared ambitions. The Children In Care Partnership Group has

reported to the Children's Trust Board and the Corporate Parenting Group. Impressive and excellent progress was made through the Children in Care Strategy and the impact of securing better outcomes for children was recognised by Ofsted in the Safeguarding and Looked After Children Inspection dated May 2012 where services to children in care were judged to be Outstanding.

2.10 In the previous IRO Service annual report the developments in 2012/13 were as follows:

- Continue to enhance participation in the reviewing processes by further developing the IRO/Children in Care Outcomes monthly meetings to analyse and evaluate the effectiveness of the IRO's service and further developing the quality and effectiveness of pre review meetings/discussions, or observations of younger children, by IRO's to promote the voice of the child;
- Monitoring areas of improvement by implementing and establishing the IRO Observation framework, including QA of review records.

The update is as follows:

- The participation of children and young people in their reviews has remained at 100% and the IRO/Children in Care Outcomes monthly meetings have developed beyond looking at performance to more of a focus on the quality of pre- review meetings/discussions or observations of younger children.
- The IRO Observation framework and QA of IRO review records has been implemented as part of the Case Audit framework. Areas for further development by individual IRO's and IRO service developments have been fed back during reflective supervision and team meetings. During the year there has been the establishment of monthly case audits by the IRO Service Manager, including by managers from across Children's Services. These are analysed and evaluated with findings and recommendations for further improvements at strategic and service levels presented to a monthly meeting chaired by the People's Director.

The future developments for 2013/14 are:

- Continue to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of the IRO service through the IRO/Children in Care Outcomes monthly meetings with a continued focus on IRO practice through pre-review meetings/discussions with children, observations of younger children, case tracking and feedback from children, young people, parents, carers and professionals.
- Refine case reviewing in response to the revised Public Law Outline.

3. OPTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

3.1 This report is for information only.

4. ANALYSIS OF OPTIONS

4.1 This report is for information only.

5. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS (FINANCIAL, STAFFING, PROPERTY, IT)

5.1 There are no resource implications.

6. OUTCOMES OF INTEGRATED IMPACT ASSESSMENT (IF APPLICABLE)

6.1 This is not applicable.

7. OUTCOMES OF CONSULTATION AND CONFLICTS OF INTERESTS DECLARED

7.1 This report is for information only.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 To receive the annual report of the IRO service.

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Background Papers used in the preparation of this report:

The IRO Annual Re[port is available in group offices.