



Role and Activity of Independent Reviewing Officers

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1.1 To note the contents of the report.
- 1.2 To agree to receive an annual report on the activity of the Independent Reviewing Officers.

REASON FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 There is a requirement in the Adoption and Children Act 2002 to appoint Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) to review cases where children are looked after.
- 2.2 The IROs are currently located in the Children and Young People's Department. In order to secure suitable governance for the independent reviewing service to children looked after it is appropriate to provide information about the activity of IROs to the Lead Member for Children and Young People on an annual basis.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

- 3.1 This report is provided to advise the Lead Member for Children and Young People's Services of the role and activity of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) in the Children and Young People's Department.
- 3.2 IROs are employed by the Children and Young People's Department to review the Care Plans of Children Looked After. Section 118 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002, introduced a new statutory role of Independent Reviewing Officer with responsibility for the process of reviewing Looked after Children cases. Section 118 amended Section 26 of the Children Act 1989 so that local authorities are required by regulations to appoint IROs to:
 - Participate in the review of children's cases
 - Monitor the authority's function in respect of the review
 - Refer a case to the Children and Families Court Advisory Service (CAFCASS) if the failure to implement the care plan might be considered to breach the child's human rights

- 3.3 The purpose of a review is to make sure that children looked after have an appropriate care plan and that everything is being done to support the child to gain the most from their childhood. Reviews are attended by the social care worker with responsibility for the case, the carer, and other significant adults to the child. Where the child is of an appropriate age it is good practice for them to attend all, or part, of their review. Reviews are chaired by IROs.
- 3.4 Regulations require IROs in the course of their duties work to ensure that:
- the views of children and young people are understood and taken into account (in care planning)
 - the person's responsible for implementing any decision taken in consequence of the review are identified; and
 - any failure to review the case, or to take proper steps (to implement review recommendations) is brought to the attention of person's at an appropriate level of seniority within the responsible authority.

Guidance issued alongside the new IRO Regulations specifies that the IRO is also responsible for making sure that a child is able to make a meaningful contribution to their review.

- 3.5 IROs are expected to fulfil a significant function in scrutinising and assuring the quality of care planning for looked after children and, where the situation arises, they have an important role in problem resolution.
- 3.6 Reviews of children looked after must be carried out within set timescales, as set down by regulation:
- Within 28 days of the child becoming looked after
 - Within 4 months of the child becoming looked after
 - Thereafter at least every 6 months

Where a child moves placement the review cycle re-starts. Timescales of reviews is one of the Performance Assessment Framework measures (PAF C68). Currently the performance against this indicator is 68.4%. A challenging target has been set for 2006/07 of 95%.

- 3.7 There are 3.5 whole time equivalent IRO posts in the Children and Young People's Department. Three fulltime IROs currently review 379 children looked after. A part time IRO (.5) reviews the short break arrangements for disabled children. At the moment there are 80 disabled children who have short breaks. The workload is high and a factor increasing workload pressure is that Derby has children are placed all over the country. This factor applies particularly to children who are placed for adoption. The IROs are managed in the Quality Assurance Section of the Children and Young People's Department. They are supervised by the Head of Service.
- 3.8 The involvement and participation of children in their reviews is very important and the IROs play a crucial part in ensuring that childrens views are heard. This aspect also forms part of the Performance Assessment Framework (PAF C63). The current performance of this indicator is 82.5%. There have been improvements in this area brought about by training for staff and the revision of the consultation documents for children and young people. A target has been set for 2006/07 of 85%.

- 3.9 The IROs have a responsibility to raise the quality and standards of work with children looked after. Any issues or concerns that they have which are not resolved through discussion with the allocated social care worker are raised with the relevant operational manager. In addition the IROs meet with service managers and their teams on a regular basis. A Children Looked After Action Plan and an induction pack for staff has also been developed to assist in ensuring that the service to children looked after is of a high quality.
- 3.10 The degree of independence of the IRO role from direct service delivery to children looked after is being considered nationally by the Department for Education and Skills. No referrals have been made to CAFCASS by any authority since the legislation was changed, and the DfES are concerned about this. The outcome of this consideration may be a change in the management arrangements for IROs.

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Background papers:
List of appendices: Appendix 1 - Implications

IMPLICATIONS

Financial

1. The cost to the authority of employing IRO is mainly made up of the salary costs for the 3.5 whole time equivalent IROs and 2 administrative staff. These costs total £190,000.

Legal

2. The Adoption and Children Act 2002 Section 118 amended the Children Act 1989 Section 26 and introduced the requirement to have all cases where children are looked after independently reviewed.

Personnel

3. At the present time the Independent Review team is fully staffed. Their workload needs to be monitored to ensure that the independent review service is able to hold reviews of children looked after to timescale.

Equalities impact

4. Achieving equity and equality of opportunity for children looked after is an important theme in our work. The reviewing of children's cases looks carefully at issues of equality and identity and these aspects of a child's life are addressed in their care plan.

Corporate objectives and priorities for change

5. The role of the Independent reviewing Officer fits clearly with the corporate objective of improving outcomes for children looked after.