



# Corporate Parenting Board

## 27 November 2013

**Report Title**

**Annual report Safeguarding Service  
Looked After Children 2012- 2013**

**Cabinet Member with  
Lead Responsibility**

Councillor Val Gibson  
Children & Young People

**Wards Affected**

All

**Accountable Strategic  
Director**

Sarah Norman, Community

**Originating service**

Community/ Safeguarding, Business Support & Communities

**Accountable officer(s)**

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Young People  
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**Report to be/has been  
considered by**

Corporate Parenting Board only

**Recommendation(s) for action or decision:**

The Corporate Parenting Board is recommended to:

1. Utilise this report to inform strategic planning for Wolverhampton's Looked After Children population.
2. Hold the Safeguarding Service to account in their delivery of services to Looked After Children

## **1.0 Purpose**

- 1.1 Wolverhampton Safeguarding Service has statutory responsibility for overseeing and ratifying the care plans for Looked After Children (LAC) via the activity of the Independent Reviewing Officers. As a result, the service is duty bound to provide the Corporate Parenting Board with an annual report that outlines the activity of the service, the impact for children and recommendations for service improvement that will enhance young people's experiences.

## **2.0 Background**

- 2.1 The annual report for 2012/13 is attached as appendix A. The Corporate Parenting Board has received annual reports in preceding years.
- 2.2 The Children and Young Persons Act 2008 reinforced and strengthened the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO), enabling more effective independent oversight and scrutiny of the child's case. It has ensured that the child is able to meaningfully participate in planning for their own care and that the care plan that the local authority prepares for them is based on a thorough assessment of the individual child's needs.
- 2.3 In March 2010 the Government issued new statutory guidance, The IRO Handbook, for Local Authorities and IROs on care planning and reviewing arrangements for LAC. The IRO Handbook states that the statutory duties of the IRO are to:
- monitor the Local Authority's performance of their functions in relation to the child's case;
  - participate in any review of the child's case;
  - ensure any ascertained wishes and feelings of the child concerning the case are given due consideration by the appropriate authority;
  - perform any other function which is prescribed in regulations.
- 2.4 The guidance became effective on 1 April 2011, as a revision to the Children Act 1989. Volume 2 of the 'Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations and Statutory Guidance 2010'. There is an expectation that IROs are more involved with children who are looked after, not just in the LAC review meeting. More contact with the child, the carers and the staff involved is also expected. This is particularly the case in matters where the IRO has concerns about the case and needs to monitor the matter between statutory reviews.
- 2.5 All looked after children, including children who are in an adoptive placement prior to an adoption order, are covered by the legislation. This applies to all children who are the subject of a care order (under section 31 of the Children Act 1989), or who are voluntarily accommodated for a period of more than 24 hours (section 20 of the Children Act 1989), including those described in this report as in short break care, or who are placed for adoption under the Adoption and Children Act 2002. It also covers those who are

compulsorily looked after, such as those remanded by the court to local authority accommodation. Since the publication of the Legal Aid Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act (LASPO) in December 2012, it has been the responsibility of the Local Authority to look after all young people who are remanded into custody. These young people now require an allocated IRO and LAC reviews in their place of custody.

### **3.0 Progress.**

3.1 The annual report provides an outline of activity covering the period 2012/13 and determines actions to be progressed in 2013/14.

### **4.0 Financial implications**

4.1 The outturn for 2012/13 for the Safeguarding Service was £1.2 million, this was contained within the approved budget for the financial year.

4.2 The approved budget for 2013/14 is £1.3 million [NM/06112013/H].

### **5.0 Legal implications**

5.1 None – the annual report has taken into account the legal requirements as outlined in The Children and Young Persons Act 2008 and the IRO Handbook 2010.  
[TC/19112013/G]

### **6.0 Equalities implications**

6.1 The annual report recognises issues of equality for children who access the safeguarding service. There are no distinct equality issues as a result of completion of the annual report.

### **7.0 Environmental implications**

7.1 None

### **9.0 Schedule of background papers**

None

**Wolverhampton**  
City Council



Annual report  
Safeguarding Service  
Looked After Children  
2012- 2013

## 1. Introduction

- 1.1 The IRO Handbook (issued in March 2010) is the statutory guidance for Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) and local authorities on their functions in relation to case management and review of looked after children (LAC). It states that the IRO Manager (the Deputy Head of Service for Safeguarding in Wolverhampton) should be responsible for the production of an annual report for the scrutiny of the members of the Corporate Parenting Board. It should also be available to the public on the Council website.
- 1.2 A separate integrated report which includes all of the work undertaken by the Safeguarding Review Managers (SRMs) in Wolverhampton has been developed, which also includes information on their role as Child Protection Conference Chairs (CPCs). This report which just considers LAC, will be taken to the Corporate Parenting Board. The chairs are all known locally as Safeguarding Review Managers (SRM) but they have the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) function. The SRMs are also responsible for regular file audits and for undertaking Regulation 33 visits to children's residential units.
- 1.3 This report covers the period from April 2012 – March 2013. This is the 4th annual report. The report follows the format recommended by the National IRO Managers Group. This group wishes to collate information from a national level, and the Wolverhampton SRM service is committed to this aim, so will be sharing the shorter LAC only report in order to assist the national group.
- 1.4 The Safeguarding service is based at the Priory Green Building in Pendeford, Wolverhampton. The team moved to the current location in December 2012, after a long period based at the Jennie Lee Centre. Priory Green provides a dedicated conference room, and a separate waiting area for families.
- 1.5 Dawn Williams is the Head of Safeguarding. She has responsibility for the SRM functions in order to maintain independence from the line management of cases and the allocation of resources within Children and Families Services. Nicki Pettitt is interim Deputy Head of Safeguarding (DHS) and she has line-managed the team for the later period of this report. This involves the provision of supervision to the SRMs and responsibility for the service including ensuring that conference and reviews are held on time and that they are correctly administered. The DHS also manages the IRO who undertakes foster care reviews. Dawn Williams has been in post since December 2012 and Nicki Pettitt since February 2013. As of December 2012, responsibility for the service rests

with the Assistant Director Safeguarding, Business Support & Communities, Rob Willoughby.

- 1.6 As prescribed by the national IRO Managers Group, this report will endeavour to 'highlight areas of good practice and areas which require improvement, identify emerging themes and trends, describe areas of work which the service has prioritised during the year, and will prioritise in the coming year.'
- 1.7 The SRMs have a key role in assuring the quality of the case planning for those children and young people who are looked after by the local authority. The purpose of this report is to provide information on the work undertaken by the SRMs in 2012 – 13 and to outline the priorities for the next year.

## **2. Purpose of service and legal context**

- 2.1 The arrangements for the statutory reviews of looked after children (LAC) were amended and updated by Section 118 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002, which introduced the new statutory role of the Independent Reviewing Officer. The requirement for such a post came into force in September 2004.
- 2.2 The legislation required local authorities to appoint Independent Reviewing Officers (known as SRMs in Wolverhampton) with the remit of:
- chairing the authority's LAC reviews
  - monitoring the authority's review of the care plan
  - and where necessary, referring cases to the Children and Families Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS) to take legal action as a last resort if the failure to implement the care plan might be considered to breach the child's human rights.

In addition, there is an expectation that the SRMs will quality assure the local authority's care planning for LAC.

- 2.3 Legislation for the reviewing of LAC and Child Protection cases is supported by detailed guidance which has been taken into account in making arrangements in Wolverhampton. The guidance includes Every Child Matters, Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 and Statutory guidance, the IRO Handbook and Working Together 2010 and 2013. In Wolverhampton there are clear Child Protection procedures available on-line from the Safeguarding Children Board (WSCB).

2.4 The Children and Young Persons Act 2008 reinforced and strengthened the role of the IRO, enabling more effective independent oversight and scrutiny of the child's case. It has ensured that the child is able to meaningfully participate in planning for their own care and that the care plan that the local authority prepares for them is based on a thorough assessment of the individual child's needs.

2.5 In March 2010 the Government issued new statutory guidance, The IRO Handbook, for Local Authorities and IROs on care planning and reviewing arrangements for LAC. The IRO Handbook states that the statutory duties of the IRO are to:

- monitor the Local Authority's performance of their functions in relation to the child's case;
- participate in any review of the child's case;
- ensure any ascertained wishes and feelings of the child concerning the case are given due consideration by the appropriate authority;
- perform any other function which is prescribed in regulations.

2.6 The guidance became effective in April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2011, as a revision to the Children Act 1989. Volume 2 of the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations and statutory guidance 2010. There is an expectation that SRMs are more involved with children who are looked after, not just in the LAC review meeting. More contact with the child, the carers and the staff involved is expected. This is particularly the case in matters where the SRM has concerns about the case and needs to monitor the matter between statutory reviews.

2.7 All looked after children, including children who are in an adoptive placement prior to an adoption order, are covered by the legislation. This applies to all children who are the subject of a care order (under section 31 of the Children Act 1989), or who are voluntarily accommodated for a period of more than 24 hours (section 20 of the Children Act 1989), including those described in this report as in Short Break Care, or who are placed for adoption under the Adoption and Children Act 2002. It also covers those who are compulsorily looked after, such as those remanded by the court to local authority accommodation. Since the publication of the Legal Aid Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act (LASPO) in December 2012, it has been the responsibility of the Local Authority to look after all young people who are remanded into custody. These young

people now require an allocated SRM and LAC reviews in their place of custody.

### **3. Quantitative information**

- 3.1 The Service has an establishment of 11 SRM's. There was one vacancy by the end of the period of this report, which is being covered by an agency worker. Interviews in March 2013 were successful in appointing a permanent member of staff to this vacancy, who is due to start in July 2013.
- 3.2 Five of the SRMs have been in post for less than a year, but are experienced and committed to remaining in Wolverhampton long term. This will ensure a stable and increasingly experienced team moving into the future. Three of the SRMs have been employed in the service for in excess of 5 years.
- 3.3 Two of the SRMs only hold LAC cases, the other 9 have responsibility for both LAC reviews and CP conferences. The increases in the numbers of looked after children in comparison to the stable numbers of children on a CP plan will lead to a need to regularly review the makeup of caseloads.
- 3.4 One SRM is off with a long-term sickness, her post is covered by a second agency SRM. The appointment of a number of permanent SRM's, including the two additional posts agreed earlier in 2012, has had a positive impact on the workloads and morale of the team. However the persistent increase in the number of looked after children has not allowed the service to fulfil all of its functions as outlined in the IRO handbook.
- 3.5 At the end of 2011-12 there were **575** looked after children in Wolverhampton. On 31<sup>st</sup> March 2013 the figure had increased to **657**. There is no expected downturn as 2013 progresses, with the figures increasing by 14/20 per month during April and May 2013 respectively. During June 2013 the figure has exceeded 700 LAC. The numbers of children subject to a CP plan have increased by 26 during the year of this report.
- 3.6 While remaining above the national average, caseloads are smaller than they had been at this stage in the last reporting year due to an increase in the size of the team and the use of agency staff to cover vacancies and long-term sickness. The Annual Report 2011-12 had hoped to maintain caseloads of 60 – 70 children per SRM when the service is fully staffed. This has not been possible. The average caseload on 31.3.13 was 92 children.
- 3.7 The team has 10 full time SRM's and 2 half time SRM's. There are 2 men and 10 women. The team is made up of SRMs from different ethnic



backgrounds. (3 black/Asian, 2 black Afro/Caribbean/mixed heritage and 6 white British.) This adequately reflects the children we are serving. The looked after children of Wolverhampton were from the following backgrounds on 31.3.13. 67% white British, 4% Asian, 10% black Afro/Caribbean, 13% mixed heritage and 6% other.

3.8 The gender and age of the LAC in Wolverhampton is as follows (last years in brackets): Female 299/46% (265/46%) Male 358/54% (309/54%). Age: under 5 – 216/33% (189/33%) 5 -7 year olds 101/15% (84/15%) 8 – 11 year olds 118/18% (100/17%) 12 – 16 year olds 189/29% (177/31%) and 17 year olds 33/5% (24/4%). The proportions remaining fairly consistent year to year.

3.9 The legal status of the looked after children is as follows (last years in brackets): Care Order 302/46% (198/35%) Interim Care Order 150/23% (212/37%) Placement Order 114/17% (83/14%) Section 20 - 85/13% (74/13%). Remand 2 (0).

3.10 Staff changes have led to less continuity for LAC in regards to their allocated SRM, however consideration is given to this issue when new staff are appointed and caseloads need to change. The moving of cases has been kept to a minimum in the circumstances.

#### 4. Qualitative information

- Under the provisions of the *Review of Children's Cases Regulations (1991)*<sup>3</sup> local authorities are required to review the case of any child who is Looked After or provided with accommodation as follows:
- First review must take place within 28 days of the date upon which the child begins to be looked after or provided with accommodation;
- Second review must be carried out no later than 3 months after the first review; and
- Subsequent reviews shall be carried out not more than 6 months after the date of the previous review.

4.2 The date of the next review should be brought forward:

- If there is an unplanned change of placement or other substantial changes to the care plan.
- If the IRO has specific concerns about a child and directs that the review be brought forward.
- Any request from the child or parent(s) for a review to be brought forward should be given serious consideration.

4.3 In Wolverhampton between 1.4.2012 and 31.3.2013, 88.1% of looked after children cases were reviewed within timescale. This was a slight improvement on 85.8% in 2011- 12. This figure is in need of improvement in 2013 – 14. A target of 95% has been set and the SRM's are aware of the need to improve the statistic, as are the social work teams, particularly those with responsibility for most of the new LAC, as there is an on-going issue with notification.

4.4 A total of 1224 Looked after Children (LAC) reviews took place in the relevant period. This was an increase of 150 reviews held, as 1074 had been completed in the previous 12 months. The high number of reviews is continued evidence of the impact of children coming in into the care system and the on-going effort of the SRMs and support staff to meet the review timescales. (These statistics are taken from to NI66 return and includes all children who have been in care for 28 days or more, and does not include those placed for adoption.)

4.5 An SRM is allocated to all LAC within 24 hours of the Safeguarding Service being informed of that child's entry into care. Written information about the SRM and the reviewing service is shared with the child prior to their first review, in the form of child friendly postcard type information booklets. Children can make direct contact to their SRM's mobile phone by calling, by text or by email.

4.6 The majority of sibling groups, whether placed together or not, are allocated to the same SRM. This ensures consistency of information exchange, oversight of care planning and decision-making, including sibling contact, and is particularly of benefit when children have different social workers.

4.7 The involvement of children in their own reviews is regarded as an essential part of the process. *'A key task for the IRO will be to ensure that the review processes, and particularly review meetings, remain child and family centred'* (IRO Guidance, Adoption and Children Act 2002.) The SRM has an important role in ensuring that the child:

- can make a meaningful contribution to their review;
- speaks for themselves if they are able and willing to do so; and where this is not possible that their views are conveyed by someone else on their behalf or by an appropriate medium; and

- has been given the opportunity to make a written contribution to the meeting, particularly if they have chosen not to attend or are unable to attend for some other reason.

4.8 The recorded achievement in this area of activity is also a measure of local authority performance, although no longer a national performance indicator. (PAF C63, Participation in Reviews.) At 31 March 2012, the figure in Wolverhampton was 90.2% for the previous year. On 31<sup>st</sup> March 2013 it was 92.5%, which is a slight improvement. This is a positive figure considering the higher number of reviews held. The figure will need to continue to improve, and the target is 95% for 2013 – 14.

4.9 Children aged 7 and over receive a written invitation to their review meeting along with the consultation document inviting their contribution to the review. The SRM is required to speak with the child in private prior to the first review and before every subsequent review (regulation 36). The requirement for direct contact with the child extends to observation of babies and younger children.

4.10 SRMs are giving consideration to creative ways of encouraging children's participation in their reviews, including those who have taken on the challenge of leading (the term now used, rather than 'chairing') their own reviews. Some SRMs are encouraging older looked after children to type their own bit of the record of the meeting on a lap top during the meeting, which they are reported to like to do.

4.11 The ability to spend more time with the young person preparing for the review comes with a lighter caseload. This contact should continue to improve the numbers of children and young people participating in their reviews. It must be pointed out however, that caseloads remain much higher in Wolverhampton than the ideal level referred to in the IRO handbook of 50 – 70 children, so improvements in real participation and other qualitative improvements will be limited by the time available to the SRMs.

4.12 The Independent Reviewing Officers Guidance, Adoption and Children Act 2002, states that *'The IRO has an important role in ensuring that all parties to the review are able to make an effective contribution.'* In order to assist in this aim, age appropriate consultation papers continue to be sent to the child/young person, and to parents and carers, prior to a review. The child's consultation paper provides the SRM with a comprehensive picture of the child's feelings about the various aspects of their care and the services he/she is receiving, and assists the SRM in ensuring the child's voice is heard. This is also a way of ensuring that parental contributions are taken into account by the SRM, particularly if

they are unable or unwilling to attend the review. SRM's are also increasingly speaking with parents outside of the review meeting, if their presence is not in the best interests of the child, to ensure they can represent their reviews both in the meeting and in the record of the meeting.

4.13 As expected, fewer children are now being reviewed by SRM's following the introduction of the Short Break Statutory Guidance (Section 20(4) of the Children Act 1989) in May 2011. 18 children continue to be reviewed by the SRMs under this guidance. The Deputy Head of Service will continue to monitor services to this distinct group of children to ensure their needs are met and will give consideration to the appropriateness of one SRM maintaining responsibility for the group to ensure consistency and the development of expertise and relationships.

## **5. Conduct of the organisation in relation to the review**

5.1 From July 2013, more detailed quality assurance information will be collected on CareFirst, the electronic data base used, after every looked after review. This is a new way of recording and monitoring key information in Wolverhampton, and details will be available which includes:

- Quality of preparation for review by social worker, including report preparation, preparation of the child/young person and sign off by manager,
- Quality of care planning, including how up to date the care plan is,
- Quality of contribution by the child/ young person and other attendees, to review,
- Quality of management decision making on key issues affecting young people (care placements/school placements/funding issues)

5.2 These details are not currently available, other than on an anecdotal basis, or if issues have arisen which have resulted in a complaint being raised by a red or amber RAG.

5.3 The RAG system has not been used consistently in Wolverhampton for the period in question and data could only be extracted manually. It will however be completed in 100% of cases from August 2013 due to the new forms on the database requiring completion before review record is completed. The next Annual Report will be able to electronically draw on this new quantitative and qualitative information.

5.4 The SRMs are also to be asked, from July 2013, to complete a Recognition of Excellent Practice notification when there is evidence of exceptionally high quality practice underpinning all aspects of the case intervention. Statistics from this will also be available for the next Annual Report.

## **6. Conduct of the organisation in relation to the case**

6.1 In 2012 – 13 no formal dispute resolution protocols were implemented in Wolverhampton. There is a RAG system that is an early alert system for identifying and raising issues with care planning for children and young people (and a way of recognising good practice) It is in place in Wolverhampton but it has not been consistently used by SRM's or recognised by social work teams and senior managers in Wolverhampton. A new quality assurance system, which links clearly with the new forms on the CareFirst database has been written and accepted by all parties, and will be in use from July 2013.

6.2 In a number of cases there have been Red RAGs issued and meetings held to address issues, which have resulted in positive benefits for children. The current system has not been consistently applied however.

6.3 Those cases that have been issued a red RAG tend to be highlighted as concerning due to drift in care planning and keys tasks not being undertaken. This is often because of changes of social worker.

## **7. Resource issues**

7.1 The increase in the number of LAC over the last year has put a strain on the SRM service, on placements and on the social work teams. This increase and its impact will need to be monitored over the next 12 months.

7.2 The improved system of quality assurance information gathering to be implemented will provide greater information in next year's report on other resource issues.

## **8. Priority areas for improvement and action in the IRO service in the coming year.**

8.1 The last annual report for the SRM service in Wolverhampton only considered the units work with looked after children. The work of child protection chairs was not included in the report. The key challenges and areas for development for the LAC reviews which were highlighted in that report were:

1. Full implementation of the IRO handbook.

2. Promotion of the voice of the child.
3. Timeliness of LAC reviews to be improved.
4. Review of the quality monitoring and problem resolution systems, including revising the criteria for red and amber notifications.
5. Improved participation of parents and carers in reviews.

8.2 As stated above, the size of caseloads has not made full implementation of the IRO handbook possible, although practice continues to develop and the SRM's work with looked after children has reportedly improved.

8.3 There has been an increase in the ability of the SRMs to meet with children in private before the review is held.

8.4 The new forms to be implemented on CareFirst will ensure that the child's views, wishes and feelings are better recorded. There is also an improved section for explicitly recording the views of parents and carers.

8.5 The new CareFirst forms will also provide improved information on the views of parents and carers on the service they have received from the local authority.

8.6 There has been an improvement in the timeliness of LAC reviews and an expectation that there is a further improvement during 2013 – 14.

8.7 The new forms on CareFirst, which will be in use from July 2013, make it mandatory for SRMs to complete the RAG notifications, which have been revised for the purpose.

8.8 Participation information is currently collected manually by staff in the SRM unit. From July 2013 this will be available from CareFirst in 100% of cases.

8.9 Areas for future development in the next year are as follows:

1. Implementation of a new Quality Assurance system for the unit, to include CP as well as LAC cases. The RAG system has been modified and will be launched as part of this implementation. The new system will be clear that any unresolved red RAG alert should move into the dispute resolution process. This will avoid duplication, provide clarity, improve communication and provide improved evidence of SRM scrutiny and monitoring of cases.
2. Continuing to improve the communication between the fieldwork services and the SRM admin team when a child becomes looked after.

This will improve the timeliness of LAC reviews and will enable improved communication before the review, to plan participation and meetings with the child/ren.

3. Young people will increasingly be invited to lead their own reviews. There is a plan to increase the involvement of children and young people in the planning for the review, including deciding who should be present and where it is held. This will be supported by guidance for the young person.
4. RAGs for LAC to be completed in 100% of cases from July 2013.
5. Working with fieldwork teams to improve the quality of care plans as a working document to improve outcomes for children.
6. Increased use of information from CareFirst in improving service delivery, data collection and practice development.
7. Implementation of Safeguarding Service Standards which are supported by policy and procedure specific to the service area.
8. To create an agile service which is enabled and supported via effective technology.
9. The development of a training pathway for the SRMs to ensure SRMs are competent and confident in their role
10. Utilise the CAFCASS /IRO Protocol to improve links with the court arena
11. To improve management oversight of IRO activity including greater challenge and feedback.
12. To develop and implement a consistent approach to the chairing & recording of LAC reviews
13. To develop a service evaluation/action plan as a result of the forthcoming Ofsted publication 'IRO Taking up the Challenge' due in May 2013.

## **10. Conclusion.**

10.1 This report has highlighted the work of the SRMs in Wolverhampton from April 2012 to March 2013 and is an update on the last annual report. The unit has had increased capacity over this period, with the appointment of a number of permanent SRM's and an increase in team size by two SRMs. The retirement of both the Head of Safeguarding and the Deputy Head of Service

and a number of other long-term team members has created some insecurity, but the swift appointment of new managers has provided stability.

10.2 The service needs to increasingly evidence, through the enhanced quality assurance role and consistent recording of RAGs, that they are an effective service with a culture of intervening and challenging when there is drift and delay or issues effecting children's human rights and/or their safety.

10.3 The next report will cover the period from 1 April 2013 to 31 March 2014.

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