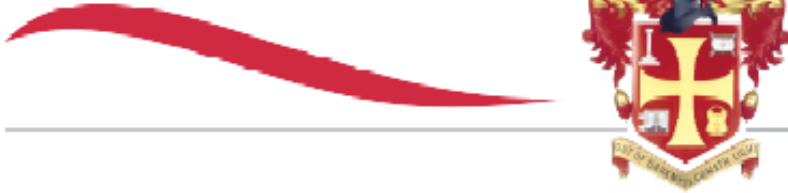


Wolverhampton

City Council



Annual report

Safeguarding Service

Looked After Children 2013- 2014

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 children in care, known as looked after children (LAC). It states that the IRO Manager (known as the Safeguarding Manager – Children, 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 This report is compiled from the team's integrated report which includes the work undertaken by the Child Protection Chairs and provides an overview of the work of the Reviewing activity too.
- 1.3 This report covers the period from April 2013 – March 2014. This is the 5th annual report. The report follows the format recommended by the National IRO Managers Group and was used in the 2012 – 13 Wolverhampton report.
- 1.4 The Safeguarding Service is based at the Priory Green Building in Pendeford, Wolverhampton.
- 1.5 Dawn Williams is the Head of Safeguarding (HOS) and has overall responsibility for the IRO functions and ensures independence from the line management of cases and the allocation of resources within Children and Families Services. Nicki Pettitt remained as the interim Safeguarding Manager (Children) during the period of this report and line-managed the team on a part time basis. This involves the provision of supervision to the IROs and responsibility for the team including ensuring that reviews are held on time and that they are correctly administered. The Safeguarding Manager also manages the IROs who undertake foster care reviews. Responsibility for the service was held by Assistant Director Safeguarding, Business Support & Communities, Rob Willoughby until 26th July 2013. Emma Bennett was then the responsible Acting Assistant Director until 31 March 2014.
- 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 IROs 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 IROs in 2013 – 14 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 children in care, known as looked after children (LAC) in Wolverhampton, were amended and updated by Section 118 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002. The Act introduced the new statutory role of the Independent Reviewing Officer. In September 2004, local authorities were required to appoint Independent Reviewing Officers 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 IROs will quality assure the local authority's care planning for children in care.

2.2 Legislation for the reviewing of LAC 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.

Looked After Children:

2.3 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.

2.4 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.

2.5 Since April 2011 there has been an expectation that IROs are more involved with children who are looked after, not just in the LAC review meeting itself. More contact with the child, the carers, and the staff involved is 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.

2.6 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. Quantitative information about the service

- 3.1 The Service has an establishment of 9 IRO's. Agreement was given to add an agency member of staff to the establishment in April 2013 due to the high numbers of new LAC. One permanent vacancy was covered by agency worker until a new permanent IRO was recruited in July 2013. Another member of staff was on long term sick, and then retired. That vacancy was yet to be filled in March 2014 and was being covered by an additional agency member of staff. In summary, the team compliment is currently 9 IROs plus 1 additional temporary IRO Post
- 3.2 The team has remained stable, other than the use of three agency workers, over the period, and is increasingly experienced. The new member of staff received a good induction which was supported by all members of the team. The majority of the team have a mixed caseload of LAC and CP. Two of the permanent IROs only hold LAC cases. The makeup of caseloads is regularly reviewed.
- 3.3 The persistent increase in the number of looked after children over the last two years has not allowed the service to fulfil all of its functions as outlined in the IRO handbook. The rate of increase in LAC in the period of this report has accelerated beyond that seen in the previous year. On 31 March 2012 there were **575** LAC in Wolverhampton. On 31 March 2013 the figure had increased to **657**. On 31st March 2014 the figure was **769**.
- 3.4 The Annual Report 2011-12 had hoped to maintain caseloads of 60 – 70 children per IRO when the service is fully staffed. Despite an increase in the numbers of IROs this has not been possible due to increasing numbers of children requiring reviews. The average caseload (including LAC, children on a CP plan, and those receiving care through short breaks (S20) on 31 March 2013 was 92 children. On 31 March 2014 it was 103. This is a significant increase.
- 3.5 The team, including agency staff, has 9 full time IRO's and 2 half time IRO's. There are 3 men and 8 women. The team is made up of IROs from different ethnic backgrounds. (4 black/Asian, 1 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.

- 3.6 The service also has 1.5 Independent Foster Home Reviewing Officers who are responsible for chairing Foster Carer reviews.

Quantative information regarding the LAC population & CP population

- 3.7 The gender and age of the LAC in Wolverhampton is as follows (last years in brackets): Female 343/45% (299/46%) Male 426/55% (358/54%) Age: under 5 – 224/29% (216/33%) 5 -7 year olds 113/15% (101/15%) 8 – 11 year olds 156/20% (118/18%) 12 – 16 year olds 229/30% (189/29%) and 17 year olds 47/6% (33/5%). The proportions remain fairly consistent year to year.
- 3.8 The legal status of the looked after children is as follows (last years in brackets): Care Order 394/51% (302/46%) Interim Care Order 118/15% (150/23%) Placement Order 123/16% (114/17%) Section 20 – 133/17% (85/13%) Remand 1 (2). This shows an increase in the number of children subject to S20 rather than care proceedings (interim care orders).

4. Qualitative information about the IRO service

- 4.1 Under the provisions of the *Review of Children's Cases Regulations (1991)*³ 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 91.6% of all LAC in 2013/14 were reviewed in line with statutory timescales. This is an improvement on the previous year when the figure was 88.1%. This is a significant improvement, particularly when the number of reviews and children in care have increased so dramatically. It is important to thank the IROs for their hard work in improving this statistic. A target of 95% was set and although this was not reached,

things are moving in the right direction. This improvement needs to be maintained and improved upon in 2014 – 15.

- 4.4 A total of 1558 (1224) Looked after Children (LAC) reviews took place in the relevant period. This was an increase of 334 reviews held compared to last year.
- 4.5 An IRO 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 IRO 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 with their IRO'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 IRO. 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 IRO 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 31st 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 IRO is required to speak with the child alone 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 During 2013 – 14 one of the IROs has been undertaking the task of considering improved ways of gaining participation from children in their LAC reviews. Her work will be available for comment in the next annual report.

- 4.11 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 IRO 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 IRO in ensuring the child's voice is heard. This is also a way of ensuring that parental contributions are taken into account by the IRO, particularly if they are unable or unwilling to attend the review. IRO'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.
- 4.12 10 children were reviewed by IROs under the Short Break Statutory Guidance (Section 20(4) of the Children Act 1989) in 2013 - 14.

5. Conduct of the organisation in relation to the review

- 5.1 From August 2013 new quality assurance questions were asked of IROs following LAC reviews. This was to enable more detailed quality assurance information and data to be collected from CareFirst (CF), the electronic database used. It was hoped that this report would include the more detailed information, including the following:
- Quality of preparation for review/conference 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 / protection plan is,
 - Quality of contribution by the child/ young person and other attendees, to review/conference,
 - Quality of management decision making on key issues affecting young people (care placements/school placements/funding issues)

At the time of writing this report these details are not available from the Business Information Team.

- 5.2 The RAG system, in respect of the Lac reviews and associated activities, has been used consistently in Wolverhampton since August 2014. Forms are completed on the CareFirst database before the review record is completed. This report is unable to draw on this new quantitative and qualitative information, for the same reasons at outlined in the paragraph above.

- 5.3 A notification is automatically sent to the responsible social workers and team manager, and ensures they are alerted to the status (red, amber or green) of the child's plan. It identifies any concerns the IRO has about a child or their CP plan, and should be a clear and valuable part of the quality assurance of the Local Authority's work which is provided by the IRO. There is an expectation that the responsible manager responds to the IRO in all red and amber cases, and it is here that further development is required.
- 5.4 The IROs complete a Recognition of Excellent Practice notification when there is evidence of exceptionally high quality practice underpinning all aspects of the case intervention. These are not currently counted centrally a change to this practice is envisaged in Summer 2014.

6. Conduct of the organisation in relation to Case Management

- 6.1 During 2013 - 14 a number of formal dispute resolution protocols were implemented in Wolverhampton, but none went beyond stage 1. The RAG system is now an early alert system for identifying and raising issues with care planning for children and young people and if this does not achieve the required improvements in an appropriate timescale, the resolution protocol is implemented. This system has been more consistently applied than was the case in the previous years.
- 6.2 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.
- 6.3 An area of future development is regular reporting from CareFirst to the IRO manager on the number of Red and Amber RAGs given each month. This is reliant on information being available via the Business Intelligence Team.

7. Resource issues

- 7.1 The increase in the number of LAC, and the number of LAC reviews over the last year has put a strain on the IRO 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 increasing LAC caseloads of IROs has an impact on their availability for chairing conferences.

8. Review of last year's priority areas for improvement and action – LAC FOCUS

- 8.1 The areas for future development that were identified in the 2012 - 13 Annual Report are updated as follows:
1. *Implementation of a new Quality Assurance system for the unit, to include CP as well as LAC cases.*

- The new RAG system was modified and launched as part of the implementation of new forms and reporting on CF in August 2013. All children are now given a Red Amber or Green rating after every review or conference. All IROs are doing this. There have been some issues with the return of timely responses on Red and Amber RAGs by the social work managers, and high turnover of staff in that area has led to some confusion about the expectations. The Safeguarding Manager (Children) has visited teams and sent clarification emails to the relevant teams. This remains an area for improvement. The new system has made additional work for the IROs but has the potential of providing improved information. The lack of electronic collation of information from the Business Intelligence Team has meant that this data has not been readily available.
2. *Continue to improve the communication between the fieldwork services and the IRO admin team when a child becomes looked after or if an ICPC is agreed. This will improve the timeliness of ICPC and LAC reviews and will enable improved communication before the review, to plan participation and meetings with the child/ren.*
- There has been some improvement in this area, but it continues to be an area that requires the full attention and persistence of the teams administrative staff.
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.*
- The increase in the number of LAC and a high number of reviews held has had an impact on the quality of work being undertaken directly with children. There is anecdotal evidence to show that children do feel more involved in their reviews, but IROs report difficulty in finding time to spend additional time with children to develop this area as was hoped. Time has been afforded to one IRO to lead this work and 2014/2015 should see significant improvement.
4. *RAGs for LAC to be completed in 100% of cases from July 2013.*
- This has been in place, and achieved, since August 2013.
5. *Increased use of information from CareFirst in improving service delivery, data collection and practice development.*
- Capacity within the Business Information Team has made regular reporting and regular communication a challenge for the safeguarding service, who continue to manually count in a number of areas.

6. *Implementation of Safeguarding Service Standards which are supported by policy and procedure specific to the service area.*
 - The service has created a number of policies and procedures to support IRO practice and business administration activity. These are available to staff electronically and are hosted on a specific Intranet page accessible to staff within the service. When members of the service identify shortfalls in policy /procedure they are responsible for highlighting these to their manager.

7. *The development of a training pathway for the IROs to ensure IROs are competent and confident in their role.*
 - A bespoke IRO module which has been developed by the Heads of Safeguarding across the region alongside Birmingham University. Four IROs joined the course in January 2014. An in-house training pathway has been developed and work continues with the workforce development service to put this into action.

8. *Utilisation of the CAFCASS / IRO Protocol to improve links with the court arena.*
 - Some meetings have been held and more are planned. The IROs report improving relationships with CAFCASS with whom they regularly liaise in respect of individual children,

9. *To improve management oversight of IRO activity including greater challenge and feedback.*
 - This remains an on-going issue and was limited during the timeframe due to limited management capacity.

10. *To develop and implement a consistent approach to the chairing & recording of LAC reviews.*
 - The new CareFirst forms have had a positive impact in regards to this aim. Development work has been undertaken in this area via team meetings and individual supervision. Improvements have been noted but it remains an area for continuing development.

11. *To develop a service evaluation/action plan as a result of the forthcoming Ofsted publication 'IRO Taking up the Challenge' due in May 2013.*
 - This was completed in July 2013.

9. Priority areas for improvement and action in the IRO service in the coming year.

9.1 ***Aim for full implementation of the IRO handbook.*** The 2012-13 Annual Report recommended that the IRO handbook be implemented in the service. As was the case last year, the size of caseloads and significant increase in the number of LAC reviews has made full implementation of the IRO handbook impossible. Despite this the IROs report that they remain committed to meeting as many children as possible between reviews. It remains a hope that with increased staffing in the team and reducing numbers of LAC there will be improvements in this area.

9.2 ***Monthly reporting of key information to be provided to the IRO service.*** There is very limited regular reporting available to the service. The new CF forms ensure that the child's views, wishes and feelings are better recorded, that an improved section for explicitly recording the views of parents and carers would be implemented and that there would be improved information on the views of parents and carers on the service they have received from the local authority. This has not yet been available to the Safeguarding Service. It remains a priority for improved and more regular reporting to the Safeguarding service in respect of:

- Timeliness of reviews/conferences
- Participation
- Quality assurance information
- RAG ratings and timeliness of responses

Participation information is still currently collected manually by staff in the IRO unit, although it should be available from careFirst.

Ensuring that reports are regularly available to the Safeguarding Service from CF is a priority for 2014 – 15.

9.3 ***Centralised recording of the number of Recognition of Excellent Practice notifications to be held and updated.***

9.4 ***A review to be quality to be undertaken - the exceptionally high number of reviews held may impact on good quality practice.***

9.5 ***Training pathway for IROs to be reviewed and implemented.***

9.6 ***A whole service review to be progressed to ensure resources reflect the required capacity for delivery of a robust service.***

10. Conclusion.

- 10.1 This report has highlighted the work of the IROs in Wolverhampton from April 2013 to March 2014 and is an update on the last annual report.
- 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 2014 to 31 March 2015.