

Interim Independent Reviewing Officer Report



Introduction

This is an interim report to update members on the direction of the Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) service for Looked after Children in Haringey. The report contains initial findings on the work of the service for the period up to 31st March 2012. A full report will be produced in September 2012.

1. Legal Context

1.1 The Children and Young Peoples Act 2008 which came into force in April 2011 significantly strengthened the role of the IRO's and gave them the responsibility of monitoring the function and performance of the local authority in relation to outcome for children looked after. The intention of these changes was to give IRO's the power to provide effective independent challenge and scrutiny of children's case and to ensure that the child's interests are protected throughout the care planning process.

1.2 The 1989 Children's Act, the IRO handbook and the more recent Care Planning and Case Review Regulations 2010 brought together a single set of regulations with those duties which are at the heart of effective corporate parenting to improve the outcomes of looked after children namely;

- Placing the child at the centre of the work
- Effective care planning
- Ensuring that a child or young person is provided with accommodation which meets his/her needs
- To appoint an IRO
- Ensuring that an effective review is conducted of the child's case within the specified timescales
- The circumstances in which the local authority must consult with the IRO
- The functions of the IRO both in relation to the reviewing and monitoring of each child's case
- The actions that the IRO must take if the local authority is failing to comply with the regulations or is in breach of its duties to the child in any material way, including making a referral to CAFCASS

1.3 In November 2011 The Family Justice Review reported on the role of the IRO their findings were as follows;

- The role of the IRO is an important to local authorities and they would very likely recreate it were it removed from them. The priority should be to improve the quality of the function and ensure its effectiveness and visibility

- We recommend that the local authorities should review the operation of their IRO service to ensure that it is effective. In particular they should ensure that they are adhering to guidance regarding case loads
- We recommend that the Directors of Children's Service/Directors for social Services and lead Member for children receive regular reports from the IRO on the work undertaken and its outcomes. Local Safeguarding Children's Board should also consider such reports
- Courts would benefit from this information too alongside outcomes of care cases. The pilot recommended earlier (for courts to receive information about the outcomes for children and families on which they have adjudicated) should include information from the IRO
- The courts and IRO's need to develop more effective links. Guardian and IRO's should strengthen their working relationship

2. The Independent Reviewing Service in Haringey

The IRO's are part of the Safeguarding, Quality Assurance and Practice Development Service.

Over many years there has been a stable team of IRO's who have offered consistency and an extensive knowledge of Haringey's children and young people in care. During the year three long standing permanent members of the team have moved on and the vacancies have been covered by experienced IRO's on an agency and session capacity. To achieve the stability children and young people needed we are in the process of advertising the vacant posts. There are currently 7 established Independent Reviewing Officers posts, with additional capacity of two

The Practice Context

Over the last year IRO's have embedded their role further by:

- Developing stronger links and raising their profile with the Children in Care teams, this has enabled them to exercise their statutory functions more effectively. Social workers increasingly value their expertise and independence.
- Making presentation to the Corporate Parenting Advisory Committee on the work and findings of the IRO's
- Delivered induction training for social work students on the Looked After Children process
- Working with colleagues in Systems Support to steam line the FWi systems for recording reviews decisions and discussion.
- Undertaking a sample audit of children who came into care during October 11- January 12 and a series of checklist audits to identify concerns, issues and themes.
- Contributing to the work of the permanency tracking meetings and the and the Multi-agency Health and Educational wellbeing group

3.1 The formal procedures for the resolution of concerns are now more rigorously and routinely used, this has made it possible for the service to not only identify and address concerns in relation to individual children but to monitor emerging themes and capture the collective experience of children looked after. This information has been used on a number of occasions to influence the direction of policy and effect changes in the way services are planned and delivered.

Concerns have centred on a number of key areas of policy and practice:

3.2 Timeliness of assessment, decision making and action – a number of the concerns related to drift and delay at various stages of a child’s journey in care. Analysis of the data shows the need for clear timely planning for permanency and in working towards reunification, there also appears to be a need to look at ensuring proactive planning for young people in care who have been in secure accommodate/prison. In addition to timeliness in planning, a number of issues related to timely decision making around finances and access resources. In the majority of cases funding was agreed but the delay can impact on the child’s care experience. Achieving “timeliness” in care planning is a priority activity in the Council Plan, and for social workers and managers across Children and Families.

3.3 The funding arrangements for foster carers of young people of 18 plus who would like to stay in their foster placement during their last year at school prior to moving on to further education. This has been raised by the IRO’s on a number of occasions and has resulted in the 18 Plus Service working on the development of a “Staying Put” policy which makes explicit the financial support that will be offered to carers in these circumstances. When in place this policy and the financial planning behind it will support Social Workers and the Placement Service in working with in-house and external carers at a earlier point to make the transition to the post 18 arrangements. This will prevent the situation where young people experience unnecessary uncertainty when their focus should be on achieving the necessary exam results and making future plans

3.4 The issue of whether the local authority should be paying for young people in their care to apply for British Citizenship has also a risen a number of times.

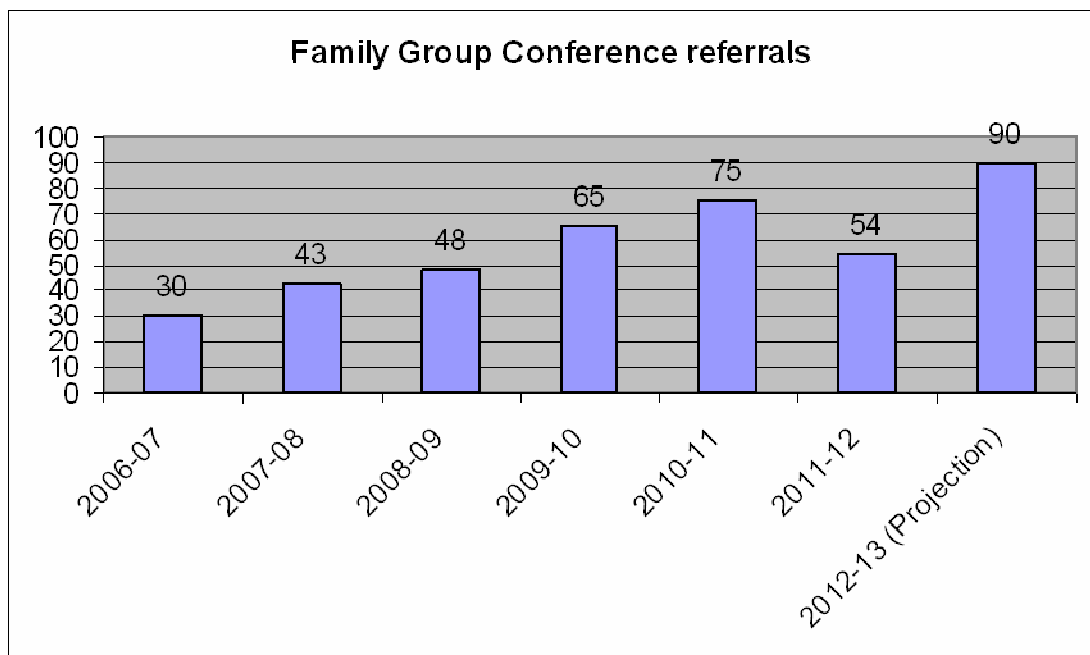
3.5 All the above issues were resolved through discussion with the social work teams and senior managers and there was no need to escalate outside the local authority to CAFCASS.

3. Family Group Conferences

4.1 A family group conference is a process led by family members to plan and make decisions for a vulnerable child/children who are at risk. Families, including extended family members and in some cases close family friends are assisted by an independent family group conference coordinator to

prepare for the meeting. At the first part of the meeting, social workers and other professionals set out their concerns and what support could be made available. In the second part family members meet on their own to make a plan for the child. Haringey is now using FGC's for children in the community and those in care where family members are being sought as an alternative to a foster placement or adoption outside the family.

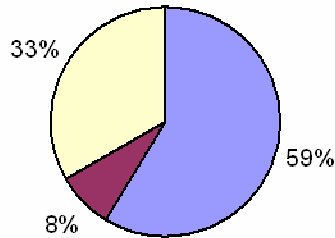
4.2 The Family Group Conference service is located in the Safeguarding, Quality Assurance and Practice Development Service. During 2011-12 there was a decline in the numbers of referrals for FGC. To redress this, the service has been re-launched as part of the drive towards earlier intervention and family support. A series of short workshop for social workers and managers promoted the rationale behind Family Group Conferences, the leaflet for families has been redesigned and FGC Coordinators are going to provide open surgeries which will enable workers to discuss specific cases and debate more general issues relating to engaging the wider family. It is projected that in 2012-13 there will be in the region of 90 referrals for FGC's.



4. Audits

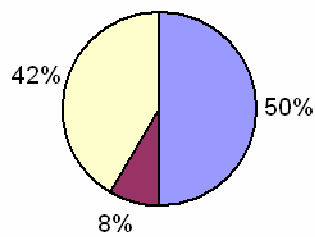
The team recently completed a small snapshot audit involving the Child's care plan, wishes and feelings, PEP, paternal involvement and placement the feedback from this was as follows:

Are the child's Wishes and Feelings clearly reflected in the notes?



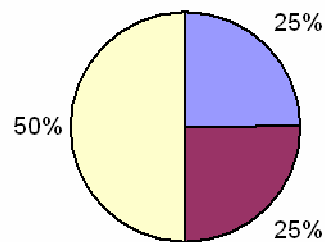
■ Yes ■ No □ Unable to express wishes and feelings

Is there evidence that the child has been given information and explanations to enable them to develop their own views?



■ Yes ■ No □ Unable to understand explanations

Is the Personal Education Plan of satisfactory quality?



■ Yes ■ No □ Child not in education

The audit has highlighted the need for further work, especially, in relation to capturing the views, wishes and feelings of our Looked after Children. To progress this we are currently conducting a piece of work with the Child Protection Advisors to enable us to better understand how we can ascertain children's views. Specifically we aim to identify which tools social workers use to assist them in ascertaining the child's opinions and feelings and how once gathered the information is used. Currently the IRO's seek the view of children and young people through a paper questionnaire and VIEWPOINT (electronic consultation document). Following the audit stage it is the intention to talk to young people and get them to inform us about they would like to be communicated with.

5. Future Work

- IRO are involved in the implementation of the Family Justice Review and the work to prevent delay in care proceedings. This will include further strengthening their role in relation to permanency planning, when the remit of the Adoption Panel is reduced and working with Cafcass to achieve a seamless hand over of responsibilities from the children's Guardians.
- To ensure that every child/young person has a named IRO and that their review is held within the given timescales and decisions and minutes are circulated on time.
- To scrutinise care plans and inform managers where written documents are not completed
- For an IRO to attend the Safeguarding Panel for the interests of Looked After Children
- To be part of any working parties for Sexual Exploitation.
- To recruit and establish a permanent group of IRO's
- To establish effective and timely feed-back mechanisms between the IRO's and the operational managers and staff across Children and Families so that issues of concern can be addressed and dealt promptly and emerging themes highlighted.
- Retaining a focus on children and Young people participation – developing age appropriate approaches to consultation.

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