

HAMPSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Report

Panel:	Children and Families Advisory Panel
Date:	8 February 2022
Title:	Annual Independent Reviewing Service Report 2020-21
Report From:	Director of Children's Services

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1. Purpose of this Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide the Panel with the Independent Reviewing Service Annual Report 2021

2. Recommendation(s)

That the Children and Families Advisory Panel note this report on the work of the Independent Reviewing Service.

3. Executive Summary

This annual report summarises the work of the Independent Reviewing Service (IRS) in line with the key areas specified in statutory guidance. It identifies areas of good practice and the positive response of the service to the Covid-19 challenges. The IRS has contributed to the transformation and continuous improvement work taking place across the department, including the embedding of the Hampshire Approach. The Transforming Social Care Programme has undertaken a Service Review to look at how improvements can be made going forward. This report acknowledges the areas for further development of the service in the future, most notably, the continued improvement of the IRS quality assurance to further evidence the impact on outcomes for children.

4. Contextual information

- 4.1 The purpose of this report is to provide the annual update on the work of the Independent Reviewing Service (IRS) in Hampshire.
- 4.2 This annual report covers the period from 31 July 2020 to 31 July 2021.

5. Background, context, and key facts

- 5.1 The appointment of an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) for a child or young person in the care of the Local Authority is a legal requirement under s.118 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002.
- 5.2 The IRO Handbook, issued in March 2010, provides Local Authorities with statutory guidance on how IROs should discharge their duties. The guidance confirms that the primary role of an IRO is:

To ensure that the care plan for the child fully reflects the child's current needs and that the actions set out in the plan are consistent with the local authority's legal responsibilities towards the child (at para. 2.10).

- 5.3 The IRO Handbook states that the IRO manager should be responsible for producing an annual report for the scrutiny of the members of the Corporate Parenting Board. The IRO Handbook specifies six areas that an annual report should reference. They are as follows:
- Development of the IRO service including information on caseloads, continuity of employment, the profile of the team and how it reflects the identity of the children it is serving;
 - Number of reviews that are held on time, the number that are held out of time and the reasons for the ones that are out of time;
 - Extent of participation of children and their parents;
 - Outcomes of quality assurance audits in relation to the organisation, conduct and recording of reviews;
 - Procedures for resolving concerns, including the local dispute resolution process, an analysis of the issues raised in dispute and the outcomes;
 - Whether there are any resource issues risk the delivery of a quality service to all looked after children.
- 5.4 In Hampshire, the role of the IRO also includes the function of independent Chair of child protection conferences.
- 5.5 By way of context and background, at the end of July 2021, the number of full-time Children Looked After (CLA) in Hampshire was 1,669. At the end of July 2020 this figure was 1,647 which represents a 1.4% increase in 2021. During the same period, the number of children subject to a Child Protection (CP) Plan decreased by 45 children from 1,108 to 1,063 at the end of July 2021. This represents a 4.1% decrease. In terms of activity for the period covered by this report, 4,768 CP conferences were chaired and 4,480 CLA reviews were undertaken between 1 July 2020 and 31 July

2021 (for full-time CLA and including Statutory Reviews and Statutory Adoption Reviews), resulting in the Independent Reviewing service holding a total of 9,248 statutory meetings during that year.

- 5.5 There are clear indications that the ongoing programme of transformation in children's social care over recent years continues to have an impact on the number of children being able to remain safely at home within their families and communities. The emphasis within this programme on reunification and permanence, and the application of strength-based family work initiatives (including multi-disciplinary specialist and intensive workers within social work teams) indicates positive outcomes regarding the number of children in care and on child protection plans. The IRS continues to focus on ensuring reunification is achieved in the safest and most timely way, including examining how the service can develop their own strength-based practice to ensure continuity of experience for young people and their families.

6 Development of the IRO service, including, information on caseloads, continuity of employment, the profile of the team and how it reflects the identity of the children it is serving

- 6.1 There are currently 22.5 full time equivalent (FTE) IRO posts, line managed on an area basis (East and West) by two Lead IROs.
- 6.2 In the East, staffing has been stable with the one vacancy arising due to a staff member retirement and the position was filled following recruitment.
- 6.3 In the West there have been two IROs who have left the service and both positions have been recruited to. The previous agency IRO contract has been replaced with a 1-year temporary contract. There is one staff member who is long-term sick, and this position is currently being covered by a 0.5 temporary contract.
- 6.4 The IRS service continues to use some casually employed Child Protection Conference Chairs where and when this is required. The service employs eight experienced casual chairs who have been vital in ensuring we deliver an effective and flexible service with the ability to be agile in meeting variations in demand. This allows the service to maintain the focus of the IRO role for allocation to our Looked After Children to ensure the statutory obligation in respect of that provision is protected and met.
- 6.5 Average FTE caseload for IROs in Hampshire is 91 which includes both children looked after and child protection conferences. IRO caseloads have had some impact due to the turnaround time for the recruitment process as well as some staff sickness. CP Conference Chair responsibilities are held in addition to the IRO role in Hampshire. The statutory guidance, within the IRO Handbook (dated 2010), recommends a caseload of 50-70 looked after children for a full-time equivalent IRO.

Nationally these figures vary hugely across authorities. In Hampshire the service works hard to robustly manage the caseloads of IROs through regular monitoring (reporting monthly to the DCS) and Lead IROs are overseeing throughput of work and ensuring a drive and focus on reunification and Special Guardianship Orders to keep children within their families where appropriate.

- 6.6 A review of the service to understand demand, workload and to ensure appropriate and efficient use of resource was undertaken in 2021 as part of the Transforming Social Care Programme. A range of recommendations were identified which have contributed to further improvements in quality, performance, and impact within the Service. Most of these recommendations have been completed which have benefitted the service one example is the employment of a Data Lead post for the service. All recommendations will be completed by the 31 March 2022.
- 6.7 The majority (83.5%) of children in Care in Hampshire are White British, this being reflected by the make-up of the cohort or IROs within the IRS service. Six IROs are male and 16 are female all being White British.
- 6.8 In March 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in wide-ranging restrictions across the country, as with all aspects of children's social care, impacted directly on the work of the IRS in Hampshire. Local offices were closed, with staff, partners, children, and families unable to meet face-to-face for conferences or reviews. As with the rest of the branch, work continued with business as usual whilst doing things differently. In response to these challenges the IRS service worked closely with social care teams and partners to develop processes that meant CP conferences and CLA reviews could be held virtually.
- 6.9 Between July 2020 and July 2021 all Child Protection Conferences continued to be held virtually. Participation of parents and agencies has improved since working virtually and IRS in collaboration with the Isle of Wight are actively planning the use of virtual and hybrid meetings going forward due to its success and the updated technology in all buildings in due course will further enable this going forward. Another positive is that adjourned and cancelled conferences have remained low in numbers since holding conferences virtually.
- 6.10 A recent Child Protection Audit demonstrated that 98% of professionals found it beneficial to attend conferences virtually and stated that they would prefer attending this way in the future. The IRS will hold conferences in the future where parents, social workers and CP chairs attending in person with all professionals being virtual. This work is a key focus on the IRS action plan and will need to ensure that it is based on views and feedback from children/parents.
- 6.11 Children have reported that they have liked the use of MS Teams or WhatsApp. IROs have reported that they have seen some improvement in children participating in their CLA reviews although this is dependent on their ages and levels of understanding.

6.12 Currently IROs are visiting children 15 working days before a review and establishing how they want their review to be held, giving them the options to hold the meeting in person or virtually.

7 Number of reviews that are held on time, the number that are held out of time and the reasons for the ones that are out of time

7.1 CLA Review timeliness for the rolling year to date at the end of July 2021 was 94.1% an increase from 71.8% in July 2020. The results between 2020 and 2021 have shown a marked improvement and an increase of 22.3%; this shows evidence of continued progress.

8 Extent of participation of children and their parents

8.1 Information provided by the data team and extracted from ICS, indicates that the reported position on participation by young people aged 4 years and over in reviews is 98%. This is an increase when compared to 88.2% in 2020. Since Covid-19, IROs report children's participation has improved due to the use of MS Teams/WhatsApp, particularly in the older cohort of children

8.2 Child participation in CP conferences is the subject of a separate report to CFMT; in summary and across several key areas audited, performance was better than the September 2019 audit.

8.3 Twenty-two children over the age of 10 years attended their conference during the snapshot timeline of the participation audit; all met with the chair prior to the meeting and 21 had prior preparation with the Social Worker. However, the Participation audit report highlighted that of the 78% of the children who did not attend their conference, the majority had their wishes and feelings represented. The child's wishes, and feelings were expressly referenced in 97% of cases from social work reports. Only 3% of children submitted a document to conference whereby their feelings were recorded independently. Improvements have been sustained, but further work is needed to embed participation rather than using the representation of a child's views as the norm.

8.4 The annual Care Plan audit considers the issue of participation in CLA planning processes. This report has been presented to CFMT.

9 Outcomes of quality assurance audits in relation to the organisation, conduct and recording of reviews

9.1 The annual Care Plan and review audit was carried out between 30 November 2020 and 3 January 2021

9.2 A repeat audit of agency participation in, and report contribution to, CP conferences was conducted for a two-week period starting from the 1 June to the 18 June inclusive. This year's audit was completed in three parts. Part 1 presented the information pertaining to conference invitations and attendance. Part two presented information regarding

holding conferences virtually and part 3 presented information pertaining to participation and the presentation of the child's wishes and feelings.

- 9.3 Local CP administrators in each district answered key questions for each conference held that week. Headlines from this snapshot of practice included multi- agency engagement, as part of the CP conference process, this showed an increase in attendance from the previous audit. In terms of report submission, the sharing of these reports with the conference chair and families concerned had also increase/improved.
- 9.4 School, school nursing and CAMHS service engagement improved significantly and contributed to the overall increase in attendance and conference quoracy had been significantly supported by colleagues from these services and from colleagues in health visiting and Police.
- 9.5 Since Covid-19, Child Protection chairs report participation and attendance from all agencies has been improved and this has been demonstrated within the results of the Participation Audit.
- 9.6 As part of the ongoing work in developing the Hampshire Approach, during the last year, the CP plan template has been revised in line with the strength-based model and renamed the Family Plan. The CLA review record template has been changed from August 2020 to make them more child friendly. Lead IROs are also revising their audit tool in line with the Quality Assurance Framework which will capture the impact of the IRO. IRS, in collaboration with the Isle of Wight, has developed and planning a schedule of LIRO and IRO auditing of work to capture the quality, the impact and outcomes with the new devised audit tools.

10 **Procedures for resolving concerns, including the local dispute resolution process and an analysis of the issues raised in dispute and the outcomes**

- 10.1 The formal Problem Resolution Process (PRP) was commenced eleven times by eight different IROs in the year July 2020 to July 2021 - all were resolved at district manager level. This is an increase when compared to previous years. IROs have stated that their relationships with team managers are positive, and issues are resolved at the informal level without the use of PRPs (Problem Resolution Process). To capture this improvement the IRS service is working with the C2C team to ensure that this data can be easier to collate in the new Mosaic system that is currently being developed. IRS are also reviewing the PRP process to capture the low-level resolution disputes so this data can be understood.
- 10.2 Triggers for escalation include non-completion of review decisions, lack of school placement, non-completion of placement at home regulations and drift on cases.

11 **Any resource issues putting at risk the delivery of a quality service to all looked after children**

- 11.1 Considering the work within Hampshire to promote the resilience of families and keep more children safely at home, the overarching strategy in recent years has seen a gradual reduction in the number of children being looked after and a decrease in children subject to child protection plans. However, the increase in demand on social care because of the coronavirus pandemic has reversed the trend.
- 11.2 IROs have been asked to identify children on their caseloads who should be achieving their 'right to private and family life' to confirm they are robust in ensuring the plan is realised without drift or unnecessary delay and by use of formal resolution if appropriate. Within supervision IROs are asked to highlight progress in these cases. This has led to progress being made in permanence planning.
- 11.3 The main challenge in ensuring delivery of an outstanding reviewing service remains the consistency and management of IRO caseloads, particularly considering the potential increased demand on social care because of Covid-19. A further challenge is developing the evidence of the impact of the IRS on children's records from the current IT system. However, work is underway as part of the Transforming Social Care programme to review the effectiveness of the service and how it can adapt and flex to meet the challenges going forward, utilising its resource as efficiently as possible.

12 **Good Practice**

- 12.1 Led by the Lead IROs, the IRS has been fully involved and contributed to the work and development of the Hampshire Approach, particularly in respect of new recording formats to be used for care planning, CLA review and CP conferences. There have been some significant benefits of working virtually for the IRS, and as the IRS service progresses through its transformation review these benefits are being considered for future ways of working within the service.
- 12.2 Lead IROs have led work with the IROs to develop a new process for holding CP conferences. The aim is to improve information sharing and parental/carer participation and to strengthen the planning process. Covid-19 has impacted on the further development of this process with a wider staff group, but it is incorporated and progressed within the work being undertaken on Family Meetings. The service has made some inroads into developing better processes to ensure midway review points between statutory CLA reviews are better recognised and acted on. CP chairs are now also undertaking a Quality Performance progress check on each CP conference, 7 weeks following an Initial Child Protection Conference and 12 weeks for Review Child Protection Conferences.
- 12.3 As well as their statutory role in challenge, IROs regularly note and informally reflect examples of good practice in relation to front-line social work and feed this back to practitioners and their managers.
- 12.4 Lead IROs continue to input into district Performance Action Groups (PAG) using an agreed data set and analysis format and attend County

- PAG to present a monthly IRO performance report. The lead IROs attend local management meetings in districts as appropriate.
- 12.5 IROs visit and offer support to social work teams to support practice and build positive professional relationships. Each IRO is linked to a team to enable this, they attend the link team meetings on a quarterly basis. This enables case progression discussions to be more effective. This work is currently being undertaken virtually.
- 13 **Update on issues identified for development in the last annual report for completion in the coming year**
- 13.1 The Care Plan Audit will be further refined and repeated ensuring that it is both quantitative and qualitative. CFMT is asked to provide a view on the timing of the next audit in the context of the My Life My Future Care Plan format having been launched. **Achieved.**
- 13.2 A format for CLA review minutes written 'to the child' has been agreed and its use will be embedded in IRO practice from 24 August 2020. **Achieved**
- 13.3 The service will engage with and contribute to Hampshire's sector led improvement work with other local authorities as appropriate and is currently involved in workstreams in two local authorities. **This work continues.**
- 13.4 The IRS will continue to remain updated with the continuous improvement work in the department, specialist inputs to service meetings, contribution to processes and developing and participation in training where possible. This will include the recent corporate and branch focus on inclusion and diversity, initially in response to Black Lives Matters. **Achieved**
- 13.5 LIROs will ensure the issues of performance in relation to timeliness and participation are monitored, addressed and improvement is made where necessary. **Achieved**
- 13.6 The IRS service will consider the use of and incorporate MS Teams for future service delivery where appropriate. **Continued**
- 13.7 The IRS service will participate in the IRS Service Review from July 2020. **Achieved (recommendations due to be implemented by end of March 2022).**
- 14 **Issues for further development over the next year**
- 14.1 IRS to contribute to 'future ways of working' strategies, to ensure that the needs of children and families are met through face to face and hybrid meeting arrangements in partnership with the Isle of Wight.
- 14.2 Care plan audit to be undertaken in May 2022.
- 14.3 IROs to ensure visits to children take place between reviews and seek their opinion about how they want their meeting to take place.

- 14.4 IRS specific Quality Assurance/audit processes to be further developed and implemented in partnership with the Isle of Wight.
- 14.5 IRS administrative team roles to be reviewed and developed to ensure there is a strength and resilience in the service as highlighted in the IRS Service Review which will be completed by end of March 2022.

Summary and Conclusion

The care plan audit completed this year demonstrated that for the majority of children who are looked after by Hampshire Children Services their life has improved significantly, not just in the stability of care provided but for them personally in their academic and social skills and that they feel safe, loved, and cared for and are happy.

It is very evident that IROs have seen some well written care plans for children which is demonstrated within the audit results where children's needs are clearly recorded. Going forward, we need to ensure that other key documents such as the health care plan are written in the same style of Hampshire Approach. Covid has had an impact on children and parents signing their care plans but now we are out of lockdown this should improve any future audit results when home visits can commence.

It will be beneficial for children to feel fully included in the review process so IROs will need to ensure that they take time to see and speak to children at least a week before their review rather than on the day of the review. It is particularly important that during Covid IROs reported that it was difficult to build a professional relationship with the child over MS Teams or via the phone, particularly with the newly looked after children therefore this will be considered in the IRS service plan to improve this result over the next year.

**REQUIRED CORPORATE AND LEGAL INFORMATION:
Links to the Strategic Plan**

Hampshire maintains strong and sustainable economic growth and prosperity:	No
People in Hampshire live safe, healthy and independent lives:	Yes
People in Hampshire enjoy a rich and diverse environment:	No
People in Hampshire enjoy being part of strong, inclusive communities:	No

Section 100 D - Local Government Act 1972 - background documents	
<p>The following documents discuss facts or matters on which this report, or an important part of it, is based and have been relied upon to a material extent in the preparation of this report. (NB: the list excludes published works and any documents which disclose exempt or confidential information as defined in the Act.)</p>	
<u>Document</u>	<u>Location</u>
None	

EQUALITIES IMPACT ASSESSMENT:

1. Equality Duty

The County Council has a duty under Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 ('the Act') to have due regard in the exercise of its functions to the need to:

- *Eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation and any other conduct prohibited by or under the Act with regard to the protected characteristics as set out in section 4 of the Act (age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation);*
- *Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic within section 149(7) of the Act (age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation) and those who do not share it;*
- *Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic within section 149(7) of the Act (see above) and persons who do not share it.*

Due regard in this context involves having due regard in particular to:

- *The need to remove or minimise disadvantages suffered by persons sharing a relevant protected characteristic that are connected to that characteristic;*
- *Take steps to meet the needs of persons sharing a relevant protected characteristic that are different from the needs of persons who do not share it;*
- *Encourage persons sharing a relevant protected characteristic to participate in public life or in any other activity in which participation by such persons is disproportionately low.*

2. Equalities Impact Assessment:

This report provides a summary of the Independent Reviewing Service Annual Report 20/21 and is not proposing changes that would lead to an impact on groups with protected characteristics.