

Committee(s)	Dated:
Safeguarding Sub Committee	26 January 2017
Subject: Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report 2015/2016	Public
Report of: Director Community and Children's Services	For Information
Report author: Sham Kidane, Independent Reviewing Officer, Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Service	

Summary

This report presents to Members the *Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report 2015/2016*. The report provides evidence of the effectiveness of IRO services provided to and on behalf of the City of London's children in care between April 2015 and March 2016.

The positive impact of the IRO service during this reporting period is evident in the following list of achievements:

- all statutory reviews held within timescales
- increased participation of children in review meetings
- all children seen alone by the IRO outside of review meetings
- active monitoring of children's care plans and needs between review periods
- review minutes, contacts and alerts recorded on children's files
- the development of the permanency tracking and approval process
- the development and promotion of the Children's Rights services
- the development of a local dispute resolution process
- the development of review meetings between the IRO, virtual school head teacher and the designated nurse.

In addition to direct work with the local authority and the 17 children who were looked after during this review period, the IRO took part in the London IRO Practitioner Network and serves as a practitioner representative to the London IRO Managers' Group. Engagement in these pan-London groups facilitates the IRO's access to information and the experience of colleagues from larger authorities. It also ensures that the experience and needs of the City's children in care are represented in forums that have the potential to influence the direction of practice and statutory guidance about the services and support they receive.

The IRO service has been alert to safeguarding issues for children in care and continues to monitor care plans closely to include actions that address the known risks of all forms of exploitation and aims to build safety and stability according to the needs of each child.

The IRO service's recommendations to the local authority for development in 2016/2017 include a focus on:

- the quality and timeliness of written care plans and pathway plans
- financial planning for children
- the management and oversight of quality and timeliness of statutory health assessments
- knowledge and practice of contingency planning for unaccompanied asylum seeking children's immigration outcomes
- understanding and responding to the equality and diversity needs of unaccompanied asylum seeking children in all aspects of care planning.

The annual review resulted in the identification of the following development areas for the IRO service:

- timely distribution of review meeting records
- timing of midway reviews
- reducing the length of review meetings
- clearer boundaries between reviewing and case managing
- enabling all review participants to contribute to discussions in meetings.

Recommendation(s)

- Members are asked to note the report.

Main Report

Background

1. The IRO service is set within the framework of the IRO Handbook and linked to the revised Care Planning Regulations and Guidance that were introduced in April 2011. The responsibility of the IRO changed from the management of the review process to a wider overview of the case, including regular monitoring and follow-up between reviews. The IRO has a key role in the improvement of care planning for children in care and for challenging drift and delay.
2. The IRO's primary task 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. As corporate parents, each local authority should act for the children they look after as a responsible and conscientious parent would act.
3. In carrying out the monitoring function, the IRO's duty extends beyond a focus on individual cases to include the collective experience of and services to looked after children. Where concerns about the local authority's services to its children in care are identified, the IRO is obligated to immediately alert senior managers.

4. The City of London commissioned Reconstruct, an external agency, to provide IRO services to its children in care and children in need of protection between August 2011 and March 2015. A service review conducted in 2014 resulted in the local authority's decision to bring the IRO service back in-house from April 2015 onwards.

Current Position

5. There is now one full-time IRO who is responsible for carrying out the functions of the role to all children in the care of the City. The IRO service sits within the Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Service (S&QA) and is managed by the S&QA Service Manager who reports directly to the Assistant Director People.
6. The IRO's independence is assured by the fact that the position is held by someone who is not involved in the preparation of the child's care plan or the management of the child's case, and who has no control over resources allocated to or required by the child. The IRO sits away from the Children's Social Care Team in order to further reinforce the independence of the role.
7. In the unforeseen and unlikely event that the in-house IRO is unavailable to fulfil the duties and function of the role, Aidhour (an external provider) has agreed for its IRO associates to be spot-purchased to offer cover. This cover arrangement was not used during this reporting period as the IRO has not had any period of unplanned absences. The IRO service provided has been stable and reliable for each child who has been in care throughout this year and this consistency has supported the development of positive relationships between the children and the IRO.
8. The IRO fulfils its statutory duties by:
 - chairing and co-chairing statutory review meetings
 - visiting children in care
 - taking part in case discussions with allocated social workers and the management team
 - consulting with foster carers and parents
 - reviewing case file records
 - participating in any additional meetings required by the needs of the child
 - maintaining up-to-date knowledge of legislation and practice developments.
9. Additionally, the scope of the IRO service includes:
 - chairing child protection conferences
 - core membership of: permanency tracking meetings, permanency panels, service improvement groups, quality assurance review meetings, Early Help Sub Group and ICS-Framework I Sub Group
 - commissioning reviews of all children's rights services
 - management of the Annual Consultation of Children and Young People
 - participation in the quality assurance process of independent fostering agencies (IFAs).

Corporate & Strategic Implications

10. The IRO role is a statutory requirement that supports the City of London to fulfil its legal responsibilities towards looked after children and to promote their safety and ability to achieve their full potential. The work of the IRO contributes to the local authority's fulfilment of the priorities it has set out for itself in the Department of Community and Children's Services Business Plan, the Children and Young People's Plan, the Corporate Parenting Strategy, and the Pledge to Children Looked After and Care Leavers.
11. The IRO service is required to produce annual reports for the scrutiny of the members of the Corporate Parenting Board. It is deemed good practice to publish the annual IRO report on the local authority's website so that children in care can easily access their corporate parent's assessment of the quality of its parenting.

Implications

12. There are no financial implications associated with this report.

Conclusion

13. The IRO service has made significant contributions to quality assuring and improving services for children in care throughout 2015/2016. The monitoring and challenge functions of the role have been strengthened and the IRO's knowledge of and relationships with the children in care is a positive feature of the in-house service.
14. The IRO service notes the strong commitment of the local authority, in particular the hard work and care of social workers, towards the children in their care and the constructive working relationships that have developed between the social care and S&QA services this year.

Appendices

- Appendix 1: City of London Corporation Department of Community and Children's Services Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Annual Report 2015/2016

Sham Kidane

Independent Reviewing Officer, Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Service
Department of Community and Children's Services

T: 0207 332 3919

E: sham.kidane@cityoflondon.gov.uk