



**Open Report on behalf of Heather Sandy, Executive Director - Children's Services**

Report to:	<b>Corporate Parenting Panel</b>
Date:	<b>09 November 2023</b>
Subject:	<b>Independent Reviewing Service Six Monthly Update Report (1 April 2023 - 30 September 2023)</b>

**Summary:**

This report is the six-monthly update on the Independent Reviewing Service. It serves to update members of the Corporate Parenting Panel of the work undertaken between 1 April 2023 and 30 September 2023.

**Actions Required:**

Members of the Corporate Parenting Panel are requested to review the six-monthly update report on the Independent Reviewing Service and seek assurance that Independent Reviewing Officers are fulfilling their duties and obligations in line with statutory guidance set out in the IRO handbook (2010), working within the Quality and Standards Service framework to support the Local Authority to deliver good quality services, develop practice and promote good outcomes for Children in Care.

**1. Background**

This is the six-monthly update report in relation to the contribution of Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) to quality assuring and improving services for children in care in Lincolnshire.

The Independent Chairs have a dual role as Independent Reviewing Officers and Independent Child Protection Conference Chairs. This report focuses on the work of the Independent Reviewing Officers in relation to children in care. Activity relating to their Child Protection Conference Chair role is detailed in a separate report which is presented to the Lincolnshire Safeguarding Children Partnership.

This IRO report provides evidence relating to the IRO Service in Lincolnshire which must be presented to the Corporate Parenting Panel as required by statutory guidance.

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

The IRO Service is set within the framework of the IRO Handbook 2010 which provides statutory guidance for Independent Reviewing Officers and Local Authorities on their functions in relation to case management and review for children in care.

The guidance is issued as part of a suite of statutory guidance which sets out how local authorities should carry out the full range of responsibilities in relation to care planning, placement and review for looked after children. The aim is to provide looked after children with the most appropriate placement to meet their needs and improve their outcomes.

Throughout this report, the term child/children refers to all those under the age of 18. However, it must be acknowledged that some young people in the upper age bracket like to be referred to as Young People.

## **2. Conclusion**

The Independent Reviewing Officers continue to work at full capacity. Due to the court system still being in the pre-pandemic recovery period, the Judiciary and the Local Authority are jointly focused on returning to completing proceedings within the 26-week track to reduce delays for children. This has an ongoing impact as timetabling is very often tight leading to IRO's frequently having to rearrange meetings in order to ratify plans prior to the Quality Assurance Advisory Group (QAAG) and filing dates to promote timely outcomes for children. This continues to impact on time and capacity. As identified in the attached report, in the past six months there have been 451 reviews rearranged, many due to court timetabling but capacity within locality Social Work teams has also impacted. It must also be noted that the Independent Reviewing Officers also chair Child Protection Conferences where there are similar challenges and tensions around readiness for conferences. This also has an impact on their capacity and ability to work.

However, despite some of the challenges, it is pleasing to note that during the last six months only one child's review was held out of timescales and the team prides itself on this achievement which means that children's care plans are being reviewed in a timely manner.

Additional capacity has been created through the retention of two agency members of staff to fill vacancies in the team as outlined within the attached report. However, it is also positive, as outlined within this report, that agency staff support will be reduced significantly over the coming weeks due to recent successful recruitment. The Team will soon be fully established with permanent staff which will bring further stability and continuity to children. It should be noted that the Chairs are at the upper limit in terms of children allocated as set out in the IRO Handbook, which provides guidance around case capacity in order to carry out their duties effectively. As the Child in Care and Child Protection population continues to grow, the established numbers of Chairs will need to be constantly reviewed to ensure that this key area of Quality Assurance is sufficiently staffed.

Supplementary to this, the number of Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children is increasing which is having a further impact on the IRO’s capacity. The Local Authority commission specialist provisions which are predominantly situated in the Peterborough and Nottinghamshire area which, due to the demographics, means their cultural needs are better met.

However, despite the challenges over the past six months, Independent Reviewing Officers are rising to the challenges, remaining flexible in their approach and continue to build stronger relationships with locality team colleagues to promote more collaborative working. With regard to advocating for the best outcomes for children, there have been fewer formal escalations occurring and this is balanced against a backdrop of more positive challenges being made with colleagues in a timely manner to deal with any issues as they arise, keeping children’s care plans on track to ensure their needs are always fully considered and worked towards.

The team is embracing the new Quality Audit schedule through peer observations and collaborative case audits in order to continuously review and reflect on practice. The Quality and Standards Team Managers and Head of Service are now meeting quarterly to review this work in order to highlight positive practice and to identify learning themes and develop stronger practice within the team and across the Local Authority.

**3. Consultation**

**a) Risks and Impact Analysis**

N/A

**4. Appendices**

These are listed below and attached at the back of the report	
Appendix A	Independent Reviewing Service Six Month Report 1 April 2023 – 30 September 2023

**5. Background Papers**

No background papers within Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972 were used in the preparation of this report.

This report was written by Carolyn Knight, who can be contacted on 07879603618 or [Carolyn.knight@lincolnshire.gov.uk](mailto:Carolyn.knight@lincolnshire.gov.uk)

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