Independent Reviewing Officers

Annual Report
April 2017 – March 2018

Date issued

Prepared by Team Manager Safeguarding
Approved by Head of Safeguarding
1. **Introduction**

There is a requirement set out in the IRO handbook (paragraph 7.11) that the IRO service should produce an annual report for the scrutiny of the corporate parenting board. This report should identify good practice and highlight issues for further development.

This report covers the IRO service in the period from 1 April 2017 to 31 March 2018. It will set out the work undertaken within the service and provide a commentary regarding the statistical information. It will review the targets set for the previous year and set targets for the coming year.

2. **Significant changes and developments**

2.1 **Team Structure**

Since April 2016 the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) and Child Protection Co-ordinator (CPC) functions have been combined. Those occupying these roles are known as Independent Chairs. Each Independent Chair manages a combined caseload of children who are looked after and children subject to child protection plans.

Independent Chairs sit within the safeguarding service. There are currently 6.5 Independent Chairs within the service. A Safeguarding Team Manager has been in post since October 2016. The LADO also sits within the service.

The Safeguarding Team has been generally stable and settled over the year. One Independent Chair left in May 2017. It was necessary to use an agency worker to cover this post on a temporary basis. A permanent member of staff was recruited and joined the team in August 2017.

The Independent Chairs in Milton Keynes are a very experienced group of staff. Many have previous experience of management in other areas and bring to the team skills and knowledge around procedure and practice. A commitment to Milton Keynes is notable with staff demonstrating passion and drive to improving the situation for Looked After Children in Milton Keynes.

Independent Chairs are required to chair a range of complex meetings. This includes Childcare Reviews and Child Protection Conferences. In addition to this they will chair Disruption Meetings, Complex Strategy Meetings and LADO strategy meetings.

Independent Chairs participate in a daily duty rota offering balanced and informative consultations in relation to Child Protection issues. There is also an expectation that the LADO role is proactively supported.

Independent Chairs represent the service on a range of groups, panels and forums including Fostering and Adoption Panel, Housing and Health. Chairs will take a lead role in specific service areas, promoting joint working and highlighting the role of the safeguarding service.

3. **Data and performance.**

3.1 **Changes in LAC Population**

During the period 2017/18 the number of Looked After Children has reduced slightly from a high of 407 in April 2017 to 388 in March 2018.

As a result of a relatively stable number of Looked After Children the average IRO caseloads have remained steady over the year, falling from 67.8 in April 2017 to 64.7 in March 2018.

It is important to recognise that rising numbers of children subject to child protection plans has resulted in Independent Chairs having caseloads of around 80 children overall.
3.2 Performance

The IRO handbook sets out a requirement for Initial Childcare Reviews to be held within 20 working days of becoming looked after. Subsequent reviews are held after 3 months and thereafter at 6 monthly intervals.

Good practice suggests that an early review should be held following any unexpected change to the care plan, including an unplanned move.

![Child care reviews held in timescale](image)

There has been a small decrease in reviews held in timescale from 96.4% to 95.8%.

There may be several reasons for reviews not being held in timescale. Whilst strenuous efforts are made to ensure that all reviews are held in timescales, issues may arise on occasion which mean that planned meetings do not take place. Most often this occurs when a key professional is not available and it is necessary to delay a meeting. Specific areas of delay are around transition between service areas and the resulting change of Social Worker.

Independent Chairs are able to hold a series of meetings where this is appropriate and in the best interests of the child. This allows all key people to participate in a meeting.

4. Quality Assurance

The safeguarding service continues to lead in relation to quality assurance activity. Independent Chairs play a key role in undertaking monthly case file audits and regular thematic audits. Themes and trends are identified and shared more widely at Performance Management Meetings. Future plans for the development of the service places an even greater expectation on Independent Chairs to perform these key QA functions.

Independent Chairs complete monitoring forms following each childcare review and facilitate service user feedback on a regular basis. Monitoring forms are now completed on the LCS system and are more embedded in practice.

The safeguarding service works closely with children’s commissioning to identify good service provision and raise concerns appropriately.

There is an expectation that Independent Chairs provide feedback for household reviews. There is a commitment to a close working relationship with the fostering and adoption teams to ensure that placements are of a good quality and the needs of looked after children are fully met.

The IRO handbook clearly sets out the duties of the IRO to ensure that the care plan for the child fully reflects the child’s current needs. The IRO has a duty to monitor the performance of the local authority’s function as a corporate parent and to identify any areas of poor practice as well as recognising good practice.

It is important that there is a clear dispute resolution process in place to raise concerns.

4.1 Monitoring

Monitoring forms are completed by Independent Chairs following each childcare review. The purpose of this is to enable the safeguarding team to provide feedback and an overview of the quality of care planning and Social work involvement for each child in care.

![Improvement in CCR monitoring forms being completed per quarter](image)

The monitoring process uses the Ofsted grading system whereby 4 is rated as inadequate, 3 requires improvement, 2 is good and 1 is outstanding. Quarterly reports are prepared for presentation at Performance Management Meetings.
Independent Chairs’ monitoring is concerned particularly with quality of practice and figures suggest that in general performance is good in all areas; of note there has been a slight rise in the rating of care plans (2.25 to 2.1), placement plans (2.3 to 2.2) and PEPs (2.2 to 2.1). Health plans continue to be consistently of good quality and are rated good or better than good.

### 4.2 Service User feedback

Service User feedback is gathered at regular intervals. A form is distributed professionals and family members as well as the child or young person.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>% Yes Parents/Carer</th>
<th>% Yes Professionals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Were you given the relevant information prior to the review?</td>
<td>84.6</td>
<td>95.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you feel the right people were at the review?</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>95.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were the right people consulted about issues prior to the review?</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>84.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you have an opportunity to contribute to the review?</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think the child’s needs are being met?</td>
<td>91.7</td>
<td>97.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was it appropriate for you to attend the review</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was the meeting conducted effectively?</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you feel the location was right for the child?</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were you made aware of the young persons views?</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>83.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was the child able to participate effectively?</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you attended the last meeting did you receive the minutes in a timely manner?</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>52.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was the length of the review right?</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>95.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Generally feedback is positive and reflects that Childcare Reviews are usually held in appropriate locations with the right people. The feedback suggests that there is a slight query from professionals about whether they were consulted prior to a review and in some cases neither families nor professionals felt that they were made aware of the young person’s views.

In a significant number of cases families and professionals reported that they had not received the minutes from previous meetings in a timely manner.

### 4.3 Disruptions

Independent Chairs routinely chair Disruption Meetings in line with the Milton Keynes protocol reviewed and updated in October 2015. This recognises that Independent Chairs are well placed to chair such reviews and to make recommendations for future practice. Once reports have been prepared and recommendations shared with the relevant Head of Service for comment, an anonymised version is prepared for presentation to Performance Management Meetings.

The Social Worker is required to complete a referral form on the LCS system when a placement disrupts.

Within the period 2017-18 there have been ten children referred for disruption meetings.

Further work is required to ensure that recommendations from disruptions meetings are effectively used to inform wider practice and this forms part of the objectives for 2018-19.

### 4.4 Dispute Resolution

One of the key Independent Reviewing Officer functions as outlined in the IRO handbook is the requirement to challenge on behalf of a child or young person and to resolve problems arising out of the care planning process.

A local dispute resolution process must be in place. There is an expectation that an IRO will seek to resolve issues informally with the Social Worker or Social Work manager in the first instance. However the IRO may progress the dispute to the level they consider the most appropriate at any time. The IRO has the power to
refer the matter to CAFCASS at any point in the process.

A Dispute Resolution protocol was issued in 2011 and updated in 2015. This policy incorporates a form to be used in order to raise a dispute, either informally or formally. This form has recently been included into the LCS system to enable accurate data to be collated and track responses more effectively.

In line with the guidance, there is an expectation that an Independent Chair will speak to the Social Worker and/or their manager in the first instance to raise concerns and try and resolve any issue which arise.

Independent Chairs have regular discussions in relation to how and when to raise a dispute resolution to ensure consistency across the service. A review of the form will take place to ensure its effectiveness and ensure that the relevant people are included in notifications.

5. Participation and Engagement

Independent Chairs continue to encourage children and young people to participate in care planning and childcare reviews in whatever way best suits them. The MOMO (‘Mind of My Own’) App is embedded in practice as one of a range of tools to communicate. The use of electronic devices and skype, in particular has become more routine and this has been particularly useful in maintaining contact in the case of children placed at distance.

In the period 2017 – 18 the Participation Worker has transferred from the Safeguarding Service to Corporate Parenting.

One Independent Chair has taken a lead in working alongside the Participation Worker and a group of young people from the Children in Care Council (Our Voice) to develop more child friendly documentation to enable them to fully contribute to care planning and review. This continues to be work in progress and forms part of the objectives for 2018-19.

Children and young people are routinely visited between reviews to ensure that they are properly consulted and that they can contribute freely and positively to their reviews. Many children are too young to attend their reviews and some choose not to attend. However the voice of the child must remain central to the process.

Independent Chairs recognise the need to ensure that families contribute fully to the care planning process and that their views are heard at reviews. With a continuing emphasis on achieving permanency for looked after children it remains of vital importance to work closely with parents and extended families forging positive links and good working relationships where possible. It is encouraging that a number of children have returned to the care of parents or extended family and careful tracking has identified other children who could return to birth families in the future. Sometimes this has been following a protracted period spent away from family and has been achieved by creative approaches on the part of a range of professionals and close working relationships.

There are occasions when children have clearly stated that they do not wish for their parents to be present for childcare reviews and there are other instances where parents cannot be present due to the risks they pose. It remains important to ensure that parents and families are properly consulted through the review process to ensure that their views are heard.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participation in CCRs</th>
<th>Child</th>
<th>Mothers</th>
<th>Fathers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average 17/18</td>
<td>88.2</td>
<td>67.0</td>
<td>41.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q1</td>
<td>93.9</td>
<td>71.3</td>
<td>41.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2</td>
<td>90.4</td>
<td>65.6</td>
<td>40.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q3</td>
<td>82.5</td>
<td>68.4</td>
<td>47.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q4</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>62.6</td>
<td>37.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The figures for participation remain almost static when compared to the figure for the previous year.
6. Review of objectives 2017 -2018

6.1 Changes to the Team

Changes within the team has led to greater resilience within the service. All Independent Chairs report feeling more comfortable in the dual role. There has been individual responsibility amongst team members to attend training and shadow colleagues. There has been a commitment to peer supervision and support to assist learning and ensure consistency.

6.2 Completion and update of Monitoring Forms

There has been an improvement in the completion of monitoring reports. This has been assisted by the fact that reports are linked to outcomes and minutes on the LCS system and are now automatically triggered. An overall completion rate for the year of 72.3% has been achieved with figures for Q1 at 46% rising to 95% for Q4.

A completion rate of 100% remains an objective for the year ahead.

6.3 Distribution of Outcomes and Minutes in timescales

Regrettably the percentage of outcomes and minutes distributed within timescales has fallen to 54.6%. This is down from 68.15% for the previous year.

Clearly this is significantly below the target of 100% compliance.

There are a number of factors which impact on the distribution figures. In some cases, the Care Plans remain outstanding on LCS and this delays the Independent Chair from completing outcomes and minutes. A document prepared in word can be sent out in these instances. However, this is not an ideal solution. Regular reports are provided by colleagues in performance which record the numbers of Care Plans which require completion as well as outstanding outcomes and minutes.

Regular discussions take place in Team Meetings and one to one sessions to address the issue. Independent Chairs report that they regularly complete outcomes and minutes using their Ipads during meetings. This is generally a positive experience although individuals have occasionally reported that a lack of internet connection has hampered their ability to complete their work.

There have been changes in the Business Support Team and this has led to delays when more inexperienced members of the team have required more time to understand the process and have needed the support of longer standing colleagues.

Regular discussion takes place with colleagues in Business Support to look at how best the distribution task can be supported. Recent action to streamline the process have been put into place. This includes changes to the way in which attendance is recorded.

A business case is being compiled to ensure that the technology fully supports the task and that Independent Chairs feel confident in its use.

6.4 IRO challenge and use of Dispute Resolution Protocol

The service has worked alongside the LCS team to ensure that the dispute resolution referral form is included on the child’s file.

Discussion takes place on a regular basis to identify when it is appropriate to issue a dispute resolution action and the issues which need to be addressed in this way. Independent Chairs report greater confidence in using the form and are more comfortable about referrals made this way on behalf of the child.

6.5 Participation of Children and Young People in their reviews

The participation figures for children and young people remains very similar to the previous year.
Independent Chairs continue to work very closely with Social Work colleagues and the Participation Worker to ensure that children and young people participate effectively in care planning and reviews.

The results of the Bright Spots survey has been circulated to Independent Chairs to ensure that they take account of its findings.

It is recognised that there is still work to be done around developing child friendly documentation which makes plans, minutes and reports more accessible to children and young people. During the year 2017-18 the Participation Worker has moved to the Corporate Parenting Service.

6.6 Contribution to Quality Assurance

Independent Chairs continue to be committed to the process of Quality Assurance and recognise that they are uniquely placed to comment on a range of services affecting children and young people who are looked after by Milton Keynes Council.

As leaders of the Quality Assurance programme of activity Independent Chairs routinely complete case file audits and take part in regular themed audits.

Challenge is raised in relation to specific children and young people in a range of ways. The difficulties faced by the Fostering Team was recognised by Independent Chairs and now that permanent Team Managers have been appointed there is a commitment to working alongside them in a positive way to help bring about improvements to the service.

7. Objectives for 2018 - 2019

7.1 Distribution of Outcomes and Minutes in timescales

The aim remains for 100% distribution of outcomes and minutes during 2018-19.

- In order to achieve this Independent Chairs will continue to use existing technology effectively and trial new technology where appropriate to ensure that outcomes and minutes are completed well within timescales.

- A new electronic form to record attendance and meeting details has been implemented to ensure timely updates on LCS and GDPR compliance.

- Clear procedures are in place in relation to close working practices with Business Support to improve distribution.

7.2 IRO challenge and use of Dispute Resolution Protocol

Independent Chairs will routinely complete the Dispute Resolution forms on LCS where appropriate.

- Regular discussions will take place in Team meetings and Peer supervision to ensure a consistent approach.

- Discussions will take place with the Team Manager to ensure timely use of the protocol.

- An audit of the use of dispute resolution will be completed by the Team Manager to analyse its effectiveness and make further recommendations to feed back to the team.

7.3 Participation of children/young people and their families in reviews

Independent Chairs recognise the importance of participation for both children and their families to improve outcomes.

- Independent Chairs will continue to work closely with Social Work colleagues to ensure that all children and young people participate fully along with their families where appropriate.

- The Participation Worker will be invited to monthly meetings with the chair to ensure close working relationships and links to the ‘Our Voice’ children in care council.
- The feedback form for all participants in childcare reviews will be improved.
- There will be an expectation that feedback forms are distributed for completion at every Childcare Review.

7.4 Achieving permanency for children and young people

The importance of achieving permanency is well recognised and there is a commitment to achieving this for all children and young people.

- Independent Chairs will work closely with Social Workers in the operational teams to ensure that permanency is considered from the beginning of our involvement.
- Independent Chairs will work closely with the Fostering and Adoption Teams to ensure that placements are of a good standard and that carers understand the importance of offering permanency.
- The Safeguarding Service is represented on the Permanency tracking group to ensure that the need for stability and security for all looked after children is prioritised.
- Independent Chairs will promote the reassessment of birth families where appropriate.

7.5 Improving the efficacy of Disruption Meetings

Independent Chairs routinely complete Disruption Meetings and recognise the important role they plan in the future planning for individual children as well as making more general recommendations for Social Work practice.

- Disruption Meetings will continue to be allocated to Independent Chairs and relevant people invited to contribute.
- The use of technology to record meetings will be explored to ensure that the focus remains on recommendations and actions.

- A review of how best to report findings and recommendations to the performance management meetings will be undertaken to ensure that the process is effective.

7.6 Contribution to Quality Assurance

Independent Chairs recognise the need to take a lead in Quality Assurance activity and understand their unique position in scrutiny and challenge.

- Independent Chairs will undertake regular case file audits alongside practitioners in line with the improvements to quality assurance activity.
- Independent Chairs will complete monitoring forms for all Childcare Reviews.
- Independent Chairs will routinely complete Household Reviews for carers and provide feedback to commissioning in relation to residential provision.
- Independent Chairs will continue to support thematic audits.
- Independent Chairs will continue to compile reports for presentation at Performance Management Meetings.