NORTHUMBERLAND CHILDREN’S SERVICES

INDEPENDENT REVIEWING SERVICE

ANNUAL REPORT
APRIL 2012 – MARCH 2013
Introduction

The Children and Young Peoples Act 2008 came into force April 1st 2011, strengthening the role of the IRO, with related guidance contained within the IRO Handbook, (the Handbook). The intention for these changes was to enable the IRO to have effective independent oversight of the child’s case and ensure that the child’s interests are protected throughout the care planning process. The guidance within the handbook aims, ‘to give all looked after children the support and services that each one requires to enable them to reach their potential,’ (DCSF 2010, p.4).

The Handbook sets out the requirement for the IRO service to produce an annual report. There is an expectation that the report contains an analysis of key data collated by the Safeguarding Unit reflecting performance in relation to Looked After children and young People, against the specific handbook requirements. From this we are able to monitor our progress and also identify specific areas for development. This report covers the period 1 April 2012 – 31 March 2013.

The Legal context and the purpose of service;

The roles and responsibilities of the IRO are defined in the main by;

- The Local Authority Social Services Act 1970 (ref section 7)
- The Children Act 1989
- The Human Rights Act 1998
- The Adoption and Children Act 2002
- The Children Act 2004
- The Children and Young Peoples Act 2008 (extending the responsibilities and powers of the IRO)
- Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010
- IRO Handbook 2010 (implemented 1 April 2011)

The functions of the IRO can be summarised as follows;

- All Looked After Children should have an allocated consistent IRO
- There should be the same IRO for children who are subject to a Child Protection Plan and subsequently become Looked After.
- There should be a consistent IRO for sibling groups.
- The IRO should chair Looked After Reviews (within 28 days, 3 and 6 months)
- Undertake reviews of short break services provided to children with disabilities and complex needs where he child receives a service of over 75 nights, or where there are a specific set of circumstances, (initially within 3 months and then within 6 months)
- Promote the voice of the Looked After Child
- Ensure that plans for Looked After children are based on a detailed and informed assessment, are up to date, effective and provide a real and genuine response to each child’s needs
- Meet with the child and consult with him or her, making sure that the child understands what is happening to them, can make a genuine contribution to plans,
fully understands the implications of any changes and understands how an advocate could help and his/her entitlement to this and legal advice.

- Offer a safeguard to prevent any ‘drift’ in care planning for looked after children and the delivery of services to them
- Monitor the activity of the local authority as a corporate parent in ensuring that care plans have given proper consideration and weight to the child’s wishes and feelings
- Challenge Children’s Services, where appropriate, to ensure the best life chances for children and young people.
- To have an effective means of challenging a Local Authority including access to independent Legal Advice, a Dispute Resolution Procedure and the ability to convey concerns to CAFCASS.
- Carry out Regulation 33 visits to Northumberland Children’s Homes to provide independent scrutiny of the residential service provided to Looked After young people in Northumberland.

During the period covered by this report, the undertaking of Foster Care Reviews in Northumberland has continued to be undertaken by an individual worker working with the Family Placement Service. There is the potential for conflict where IRO’s are overseeing the plans for Looked after Young Person, promoting their views and also reviewing foster carers, we have found the latter process has addressed this issue and reinforced independency for us.

**Significant events**

In this review period Northumberland County Council Children’s Services received both the informal and formal feedback from the Ofsted Inspection which took place at the end of March 2012. All members of the Safeguarding Unit contributed to the information provided to the Inspectors, both directly and indirectly.

Ofsted acknowledged the positive progress being made in delivering a quality of service to Looked after Children within Northumberland. However, the Inspectors also identified a capacity issue for the IRO’s and referenced this in their final report, 14 May 2012 stating that within 6 months, Northumberland County Council should ‘review the capacity of the IROs to enable them to routinely undertake direct work with children, young people and parents prior to conferences and looked after children reviews’.

In September 2012 a LEAN event was held, aimed at addressing concerns as to IRO capacity, to explore opportunities to streamline the Safeguarding Team’s key processes within the CP and LAC systems and to identify areas where expenditure could be saved to contribute to the Local Authorities overall financial requirements. The findings of this event will also be discussed within the report.

In March 2013 CAFCASS produced a new protocol aimed at promoting and strengthening the relationship between the IRO and Guardian ad Litem in overseeing planning for children and young people, particularly at the ending of Care Proceedings where the plan agreed must be actualised. It is anticipated that the next IRO report will be able to discuss the impact of this protocol.
During late 2012 and early 2013 Ofsted undertook a thematic inspection regarding IRO services. Although Northumberland were not one of the Local Authorities chosen to participate in this inspection the final report which is due in June 2013 will provide a helpful baseline upon which to evaluate the IRO service in Northumberland.
The Looked After population in Northumberland

At the end of March 2012, there were 281 Looked after Children (LAC) in Northumberland, which equates to 46.8 per 10,000 of the child population.

By the end of March 2013 there were 316 with the largest proportion being 13-15 years old.

Northumberland’s LAC population remains statistically lower than both the national average figures for LAC and the average figures for our statistical neighbours. However, there is a trend of steady increase. The figures suggest that this increase could be due at least in part to children who are living with relatives and who as a consequence become Looked after.
Keeping Children and Young People Safe from Harm, Abuse and Neglect

The IRO service and Children’s Services have responded to Regulation 24 (placement of a child or children with a friend or relative which is endorsed or facilitated by CSC) and are working to meet the requirements of this legislation. These placements pose their own unique challenges and complications, and assessments must be subject to rigour and scrutiny, so that it can be evidenced that placements are in the best interests of children in the short and long term. These placements add positively to the local authority’s capabilities of achieving permanence for child or young person, with relatives progressing to acquire Residence Orders or Special Guardianship Orders. It is anticipated that the subsequent IRO reports will benefit from data in order to be able to explore these matters further.

Facilitating children to progress to permanence including adoption within a short timescale remains a priority for the IRO Service and for Children’s Social Care. The figures above suggest that from March 2012 to March 2013 there has been a steady increase in the number of children being freed for adoption. Our own data reflects that in 90% of cases by the time of the child’s first 6 month review there is a plan for permanence in place, this will include adoption, long term foster care and SGO, for example. Children’s services through the adoption support grant have agreed that the IRO service should appoint an IRO who will focus specifically on permanence in order to further strengthen this aspect of work.

Inspections have highlighted the substantial number of children in Northumberland who have stable placements and this is excellent practice. In addition the ‘Staying put’ initiative seeks to enable young people who have been looked after to remain with their foster carers’. This has resulted in 8 young people ‘staying put’ with an additional 3 identified as appropriate. The IRO’s have been key advocates in this.

In addition to the 316 LAC there are 93 children who receive Short Breaks, 20 of these children’s placements are reviewed by an IRO. On the whole these figures remain consistent as Short Break provision once established tends to be provided long term. Short Break Care tends to be provided to children who have disabilities some of who are amongst the most vulnerable of our Looked after population and it is therefore important that the plans for
these children are thoroughly examined. The IRO service has been working with the Children with Disabilities Team on areas of practice such as the frequency of visiting these children.

**Qualitative information about the IRO service.**

Following each Looked after Review a LAC review checklist is completed by the IRO from which information and assessment of performance is gathered. This checklist is under revision to ensure that the data we collect corresponds with the specific requirements of the Handbook.

Over the year 95% of LAC reviews have been held within the required timescales. Where additional reviews are required these take place, and where there has been a delay in reviews for exceptional circumstances, it is reconvened within 20 days.

There is a requirement to share decisions from Looked after reviews with respective Team Managers within 5 days. The principle being that if these are not responded to within 10 days these are taken as agreed. A case note tool within the ICS system provides the means of ensuring this occurs. The practice of using this tool has not been consistently applied and therefore does not provide an accurate measurement of whether this target is being met.

There is a requirement for the IRO to produce a comprehensive record of the review within 15 working days. During the year the service achieved this in 40% of cases. Distribution of the minutes should be achieved within 20 working days; again this is not being fully achieved. Making improvements here will strengthen compliance with the Care Planning Regulations and IRO handbook.

Each Looked after Child within Northumberland has an allocated IRO and same IRO throughout their Looked after journey. Each IRO has a profile and this is sent out to any newly looked after child or young person.

The links have been strengthened with our Looked after children Council by a named IRO being identified to meet with them at least twice per year. Our older young person’s VMC (Voices Making Choices) designed and undertook a survey (included in appendix) recently which suggested that 66.2% (43) knew who their IRO was. When this was explored further with the group it was established that most young people refer to their IRO by name and once clarified more would have responded affirmative.

VMC have developed a contact card which are to be provided to each child and young person, detailing telephone numbers for key professionals in their lives, this includes the IRO. It is intended that these can serve as a means of increasing direct communication with young people.

The IRO has an important role in ensuring that the voice of the young person is heard, in working to achieve this, the IRO and the child need to develop a relationship;

*When they meet the child they should do this one to one so that the child can talk freely. They must check with both the child, and other people working with the child, on whether the child is OK and happy where they are living and with their care plans. They must regularly ask each child whether they are happy with how things are being done for them, and keep checking*
what is happening for each child against that child’s plans and the decisions made at their reviews.” (DSCF 2010)

In 50% of cases IRO’s are spending time with the child either prior to or following their reviews. IRO’s want to improve here but this is not always possible due to the increased demand on the service as the number of reviews increase.

The figures reflect that over the year 57% of children and young people have attended their reviews with a further 30% who did not attend their review briefing someone to speak on their behalf. Of the children who attended their review, 92.3% put across their views, wishes and feelings in a constructive and meaningful way, and almost 97% of children aged over 7 contributed to their review. These are positive and encouraging figures.

What these figures do not reflect, are young people’s comments about their reviews. Our findings are correspondent with some of the views expressed within the 2013 Ofsted report and earlier surveys undertaken by our young people: When IRO’s have met with them, Young VMC and VMC have both shared positive comments about their experiences of their reviews; they feel listened to and able to participate. The main areas for improvement in their view are in relation to:

**Attendance**: for example, ensuring attendees are relevant and that all attendees do not stay and hear private and personal information about them.

**Participation**: being enabled to chair or co-chair their meetings with the IRO and preparing questions they would want to ask of attendees with the IRO.

**Feedback**: they want the record of the review that they receive to be concise and simple. Essentially what our young people are saying is that they want to feel and be the priority and to be able to exercise control. Our intention is to achieve this over the coming year through empowering the child to take a greater role in their reviews.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Performance measure 12/13</th>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Target</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The percentage of children and young people who communicate their views in a meaningful way specifically for their statutory reviews</td>
<td>93.80%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% reviews where the child attended and their views were made in a meaningful way</td>
<td>92.30%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looked after children cases which were reviewed within required timescales</td>
<td>95.20%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of short break reviews within required timescales</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% adoptive reviews held within timescales</td>
<td>100.00%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of reviews where the IROs has spent time with the child pre or post the review meeting</td>
<td>50.00%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of children over the age of 7 who attended their review</td>
<td>96.70%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of reviews where child has an advocate</td>
<td>66.00%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRO caseloads of LAC and CP combined</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>50 to 70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of children and young people looked after for 3 years or less who have the same IRO throughout</td>
<td>79.70%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of reviews where TM receives a copy of the recommendations within 5 working days</td>
<td>27.10%</td>
<td>TBC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of comprehensive review minutes completed within 15 days</td>
<td>40.00%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of minutes distributed within 20 working days</td>
<td>30.00%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of children observed in placement</td>
<td>47.00%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of LAC subject to review where the IRO has received SW report 3 days before the review</td>
<td>29.00%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of LAC subject to review where an updated PEP has been received in advance of the review</td>
<td>49.00%</td>
<td>TBC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of LAC subject to review where an updated HAP has been received in advance of the review</td>
<td>68.00%</td>
<td>TBC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of challenges made by IRO’s to SW/TM/ senior staff</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>TBC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of LAC issues taken formerly through dispute resolution process protocol</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The IRO team.**

There are 6 IRO’s (5 full time, 1 part time) serving Northumberland’s increasing Looked After population. The IROs are supported by report writers who minute Child Protection conferences but not looked after reviews. As a guide, the Handbook states that 50 to 70 LAC cases per IRO is deemed to be good practice.

In Northumberland, the average caseload, at the end of March 2012, was 37 CP cases per IRO and 55 LAC (including short break cases) meaning an overall average caseload per IRO of 92.

In March 2013 the average caseload had risen to 51 CP cases per IRO and 57 LAC cases, (Adjusted to account for the part time post of one of the IROs the average becomes 108). During the year IRO’s chaired an average of 152 CP and LAC review meetings per month.

IRO Caseloads within Northumberland received particular attention within The Ofsted Inspection Report Northumberland of March 2012. A LEAN event was run in September 2012 tasked with identifying strategies to increase the capacity of the service. This had limited success but did provide the opportunity to streamline some processes that created some extra capacity for IROs. A significant need is to restructure the admin support to the IRO’s to ensure admin support is sufficiently able to meet the requirements of the service. This is due to take place over the summer period.

The capacity of the IRO service is directly linked to the numbers of LAC and children subject to Child Protection plans. Both these elements of the work have increased markedly over the year. Nevertheless, the service has continued to achieve excellent performance in ensuring Child protection conferences and LAC reviews take place when they need to. The planned appointment of a dedicated IRO to work specifically with cases relating to permanency will undoubtedly assist in the capacity of the IRO’s over the coming year.

**Performance management and quality assurance**

The Handbook, identifies that The 2008 Act extends the IRO’s responsibilities from monitoring the performance by the local authority of their functions in relation to a child’s review to monitoring the performance by the local authority of their functions in relation to a child’s case, as set out in sections 25A-25C of the 1989 Act (inserted by section 10 of the
2008 Act). The intention is that these changes will enable the IRO to have an effective independent oversight of the child’s case and ensure that the child’s interests are protected throughout the care planning process (DCSF Publications, 2010).

Challenge and open discussion in respect of decision making and planning for children is essential in assuring the best possible opportunities and life chances. It also contributes to practice development and knowledge, improving the quality and standards of the workforce.

It is generally recognised that defensive practice is a barrier to keeping children safe. Challenge can be uncomfortable at times and a potential shift in culture for some. There is the potential for the relationship between Children’s Social Care and the IRO service to become adversarial. In Northumberland the IRO service and Children’s Services Team Managers have a collaborative but not collusive relationship and both services ensure good working relationships across the services working with children. This is perhaps demonstrated by the fact that whilst there is a formal Dispute Resolution Procedure, to date it has not had to be resorted to.

Data reflects that timeliness and quality of reports in respect of Looked after Reviews remains an issue in some cases. Where a report is not received in time the issue is referred to the respective Team manager. In most cases the capacity of the social worker is put forward as the reason for the absence of a report.

In terms of the quality of planning for children our data reflects that in 87% of cases there are arrangements in place with monitorable milestones. Again in those instances where plans for children lack clarity Children’s Services are asked to address this, with IRO’s monitoring the progress through case discussions and subsequent looked after reviews.

A practice log is held within the safeguarding unit where registered practice challenges are noted. This allows the IRO to track and monitor responses when issues are raised. These are informal issues which fall below the threshold for formally being raised under the dispute resolution protocol. Below are the main themes where practice notes have been issued:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice Log</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Care planning Issues</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General issues around quality of practice</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timeliness of reports</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of report (inc. risk analysis)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact with child/family by professional</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safeguarding arrangements</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of communication with IRO</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate parenting issues</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Care Planning Issues:** Almost half of the 13 cases referred related to a concern that planning for the child may be drifting, the rest were split between concerns about the placement and proposed plans not meeting the needs of the child.

**General Issues around Quality of Practice:** These related to statutory visits not undertaken, concern about written agreement, not sharing information with family members, non-attendance of required staff at Care Team meetings, delays in the Social Worker making appropriate referrals for a LA child and incomplete LAC paperwork.

**Timeliness of Reports:** These mainly relate to reports received on the day or day before the day of the review.

**Quality of Report (inc. risk analysis):** These mainly relate to the quality of danger statements and quality of risk of analysis.

**Contact with Child/Family by Professional:** These relate to concerns about LA child not receiving adequate help/contact from the CYPS worker and SW visits to LA child over a 3 month period.

**Safeguarding Arrangements:** There are 2 concerns relating to the proposed care plan of children subject to CP plans; and in one instance regarding a SW not addressing concerns reported by a LA child’s school and this information not being incorporated into an IA.

**Lack of Communication with IRO:** For example not sharing new information with parent; and a failure to inform the IRO of an adoptive placement for LA child;

**Corporate Parenting Issues:** This related to a perceived drift in planning for an adoptive placement for a LA child.

**Other:** 4 challenges – (1) IRO questioned reason why a PLO letter was not put in place re child on CP plan; (2) birth father not invited to a CP conference or given the opportunity to discuss issues with conference members; (3) TM/SW not preparing adopters for IRO visits to child when placed with them prior to adoption; (4) Concerns about the failure of the CYPS service in addressing the needs of a young person in the LA system, discharging him from the service following 3 missed appointments.

Of note of that there have been no occasions when the IRO felt a child was inappropriately looked after or that their placement was significantly failing to meet their needs.

**Regulation 33 visits to Northumberland residential children’s homes**

Regulation 33 visits are carried out to each of Northumberland County Council Children’s Residential Care Homes on a monthly basis. These are undertaken with a view to being able to assure ourselves that the young people living there are receiving and continue to receive good levels of care and have access to facilities and support which will maximise outcomes.
for them. Guiding principles for this are drawn from the National Minimum Standards for Children’s Homes as set out by the Secretary of State for Health and also the ethos of the five outcomes identified in Northumberland County Council’s Children and Young People’s Plan 2011-14. The visits are carried out by a Safeguarding and LAC Quality Assurance Officer based in the department’s Client Relations Team and managed by the Safeguarding Standards Manager.

The County Council has direct responsibility for the running of six homes on four sites. Two (Kingfisher and Kestrel) are community homes at Netherton Park. Two (Willow and Alder) are secure units within Kyloe House, also on the Netherton Park site. Thornbrae is a children’s home in Alnwick, which provides care for younger children. Thornbrae also has additional accommodation for young people in The Limes. A short break care service for children with disabilities is also provided at Barndale School. This now operates at weekends and during four weeks of the school holidays, using the existing school boarding accommodation but with a separate staff group and registered manager. A re-organisation of the group homes has been initiated during this period and plans are being finalised in terms of moving the location of the community homes from Netherton Park and also combining Thornbrae and The Limes. Changes of staffing are also planned for all units. It is anticipated that the planned changes will be put in place within the coming year 2013-2014.

The Regulation 33 reports for this period contained reference to the planned reorganisation and monitored for signs of whether this was impacting negatively upon the children. The findings overall indicated that residential staff have to date, continued to prioritise and promote the welfare of the young people in their care.

During this reporting period (April 2012 to March 2013), monthly Regulation 33 visits were carried out to all six homes and detailed reports are available for these which provide examples of where practice meets the requirements of the visits. Areas of concern would also be identified and the visits and associated reports promote consideration of these with management, which can result in planning and action to contribute towards the continuing development of good practice. The reports also serve to inform management of the circumstances prevalent in each of the establishments on a monthly basis and as such, identify areas of progress, change and potential problems.

The Client Relations Team link with other Children’s Services professionals to promote young people’s wellbeing and as such, the Regulation 33 Officer is able to raise awareness of issues coming out of the visits which may need further action. In addition to the monthly reports, Regulation 33 findings are reported on a quarterly basis to Overview and Scrutiny as well as the Corporate Parenting Panel and also feed into the Independent Reviewing Officers quarterly reports.

From April 2012, Regulation 33 reports were required to contain the views of parents or family members and there have since been many positive comments about services provided across the units. Generally, parents appear to recognise the work being done with their
Keeping Children and Young People Safe from Harm, Abuse and Neglect

children. Positive changes in young people have been noted by some families speaking to the Regulation 33 Officer after their children had returned to the family home upon leaving residential care. There were also instances where parents were able to raise areas of concern in speaking to the Regulation 33 Officer. Less positive views were welcomed on the basis that they provided a valuable means of raising awareness of any issues with a range of professionals involved and this included Independent Reviewing Officers and Unit Managers.

It was also during this period that Independent Reviewing Officers were asked to contribute their views on the provision of service and its impact upon the young people for the purpose of the report. This in turn provided a useful forum for further dialogue between care team members.

Conclusion

With regard to Looked after Children, IRO’s continue to promote the meaningful involvement of the child in his or her review, and will ensure that the child’s views are always considered. The Looked after Reviews in Northumberland were within timescale 95% of the time and challenges regarding the quality of services delivered to Looked after Children are consistently made with positive outcomes. Looked After children and Young People are having a voice in their reviews and therefore contributing to and influencing their plans. Most have an understanding of what is happening in their lives and have had consistency in terms of the same IRO throughout their time being looked after.

The Northumberland IRO service has made a significant contribution to the improvement for children in the looked after system over the past year. They have accomplished this by putting the child’s voice at the centre of the care plan and by careful monitoring of the overall quality of care plans; however there are challenges that remain to be met by the IROs, including improving the timely production of LAC review minutes and strengthen the role with Looked after children between review meetings by ensuring that visits are more routine and develop stronger meaningful relationships. The service has utilised the involvement of client relations to further be informed regarding the views of children both through direct contact and with the regulation 33 function ensuring any concerns within residential care are quickly identified and addressed. This is an area of good practice.

It is the view of the IRO service that in all the circumstances the Corporate parenting committee and the Director of Children’s Services can be reassured that the needs of children who are looked after are well served and where there are shortcomings identified they are both identified and dealt with promptly.

The capacity of the IRO service will be strengthened by the appointment of an additional member of staff to focus on children who are in, or are likely to become eligible for, permanency planning. Inevitably the service will need to continue to prioritise its work to ensure where possible that all statutory functions are maintained as the numbers of Looked after children continue to increase.
KEY DEVELOPMENT AREAS FOR THE NEXT YEAR

1. Once published undertake a self-assessment against the Ofsted thematic inspection of IRO services to identify areas requiring development.

2. Continue to develop, address and strengthen the requirements of the Care Planning regulations and IRO handbook as identified within the IRO performance framework.

3. Strengthen and further develop links with CAFCASS in line with the CAFCASS protocol.

4. Once in post develop the role of the dedicated permanency IRO to ensure plans for children who require permanency, including adoption, are progressed at a pace appropriate to their needs.

5. Review how Looked after reviews are undertaken to reflect the wishes and views of the Young people concerned.