



National IRO Managers Partnership

NIROMP responds to results of Community Care poll ‘What should happen to the IRO role?’

Over 80% of Community Care readers vote to keep the IRO role with 49% voting for IROs to be employed outside local authorities.

The National Independent Reviewing Officer Managers Partnership is committed to improving the practice that impacts on the lives of children and families. Critical analyses provided by the independent children’s social care review, has brought welcome learning but also a challenge from IRO’s, the reviews proposals for reform must be judged in the context, circumstances, and political climate in which the research was conducted and written.

By [Sharon Martin](#) on July 7th, 2022

As, NIROMP Chair, I recognise that:

“IROs have a crucial role to play in making sure all professionals recognise and listen to children’s voices and uphold their rights and entitlements. Reflecting on these principles we welcome recognition of the value the independent reviewing officer brings to children in care and care leavers.

“NIROMP is supportive of and has always welcomed the freedom to try different and new ways of doing things.

“We have avoided any binary position, particularly related to the Independent Reviewing Officers role. To be clear though, NIROMP does not support the dilution of any policies or legislation that would see an erosion or removal of any child’s rights or the abolition of the IRO role.

“If there is genuine commitment to raising standards for children in local authority care, then the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer, a role that

was specifically introduced in 2000 as part of the Children Act 1989 as a safeguard for children in care, should be supported, strengthened and developed”.

“The problems facing children’s social care in England will not be solved by the removal of the independent reviewing officer role for children in care, nor the IRO role improved through situating them outside of the Local Authority.

“We should not allow continued debates about the value and position of the independent reviewing officer function to distract from the more pressing problems arising from austerity and the cost-of-living crisis.

The NIROMP Leadership Network:

“Our message is strongly focused on the importance of relational, strengths-based working within our local authority and community networks and collaboratively across government departments.

“NIROMP’s leadership will continue to tackle, collectively, across the nine government area regions of England, to mobilise the wraparound support for children and families to enable them to **thrive**, not just **survive**.

“It is our collective view that reforms can and should be made within the existing legislative infrastructure that underpins our combined duties and responsibilities for the universal safeguarding and wellbeing of every child.

“The independent reviewing officer role for children in care is valued by children and families and should remain within the Local Authority.

“If there is genuine commitment to raising standards for children in local authority care, then the role of the IRO, a role that was specifically introduced as a safeguard for children in care, should be supported, strengthened, and developed. The concern still is that children in care should be afforded equality and continuity, regardless of where they are placed in the country and irrespective of their race, ethnicity or where they have come from.

NIROMP, London Practitioners Group:

“We note the proposal to end the role of the IRO is one of a set of interdependent recommendations from the children’s social care review.

There is always a risk of taking one recommendation in isolation. (But) that aside, there are significant disadvantages in positioning the role outside the local authority.

“Without the Independent reviewing officer role, overburdened Local Authority managers would be responsible for scrutinising their own plans,

“The advantages of staying within the Local Authority are that the independent reviewing officer has not only access to the child’s electronic records, local

knowledge of resources but also relationships with other professionals involved in providing services and support to the authority's children and families.

Paul Nash NIROMP Leadership Network:

“To work alongside and be part of the solution for children and young people, IROs would be best placed within, not outside of local authority children's service. Outside may bring with it more of a sense of an 'outsider' relationship, and it would confuse the independent reviewing officer scrutiny role with regulatory roles.

“Working within the Local Authority, independent reviewing officers use their expertise to shape better planning and outcomes for children, but we recognise we have more to do.

“Absorbing the independent scrutiny of care plans to team manager roles is a contradiction in that managers will be called to scrutinise their own work; the very independence of the independent reviewing officer allows for rigorous, transparent scrutiny, and this must be better for children and young people

The IRO role adds consistency and stability for children and young people's care planning. They hold a senior role for oversight of a child's care plan – outside of operational management and therefore add value as a critical friend approach to planning.

“IROs provide consistency for the child or young person, on many occasions the IRO is available to be able to provide a consistency through the child's care journey and into adulthood. This unique position enables the IRO to be a familiar and safe person for the child or young person.

“With no responsibility for the actual delivery of service the IRO can remain utterly impartial in focusing on the child's needs and be responsive to the child's wishes and feelings.

“The IRO role adds essential balance and support to the child's plan and ensures the child or young person's views are at the center of their care plan

Relational Activism and Strength Based Accountability

NIROMP's focus has been to consistently raise the importance of harnessing collective strengths and through relational activism to making change happen through our relationships and working collaboratively.

The greatest strength of the children's social care system lies in its workforce. From social workers, independent reviewing officers, family support workers to residential care staff, the knowledge, skills, and commitment of the workforce determines how children are protected and families are supported.

“(But) social workers have also told independent reviewing officers that they are not always feeling sufficiently held and supported. Too many social workers feel forced into making impossible ethical, demoralising trade-offs – prioritising child protection over their children in care. Frequently we hear of social workers feeling disempowered, disenchanting, and demoralized, IRO's as experienced practitioners offer solutions, support, and guidance.

“The human stakes for children in care could not be higher.

IRO Service Manager, South East:

“IROs are seeing the impact of overwhelm right across the system. We are hearing from staff who feel stressed, anxious, and insecure about the dilution of children's rights and protections.”

As NIROMP Chair:

“We have a current system that has increasingly removed more children into care — 80,000 at the last count and we are moving ever closer to 100,000. “On the ground, social workers and their managers are trying to fill too many roles because of a lack of resources, and insufficient ownership in the collective system. That is a problem that is not going to be resolved overnight or without sufficient funding.

“Increasing the burden on social workers and their managers, conflating the social worker, operational manager and independent reviewing officer role is not going to resolve this situation not least the social care workforce or families most in need.

“When a breakdown of trust between a family and social worker occurs, increased attention must be given to the role of advocacy, the scrutiny of the independent reviewing officer and a re-examination of child and family strengths, rights and entitlements.

Working relationally does not mean that IROs dodge accountability or avoid challenging conversations but the problems facing children's social care are rarely straightforward. The truth is that the success or failure of children's social care cannot be separated from the political and social climate; partnership working; organisational culture and our joint skills and abilities as leaders (at all levels) to champion genuine and trusting relationships.

Public services are faced with increasingly short-term, unstable and temporary funding sources – a perfect storm of increased need, expectations and reduced resources. Children's wellbeing, and their life chances have become increasingly conditional of the local and national political context. Therefore, the best IROs embody a restorative approach that strengthens support and protection of children in care.

One reason for the current tension in the system is the lack of resources available to social workers, which would allow them to help families earlier, and instead means that problems escalate unnecessarily. We do not see any surety that the Government is willing to tackle with investment long term.

Consequently, we see a social care system so overwhelmed that it struggles to cope. Stories of child removal and child deaths live on in the stories promoted across the media, which further infects trust in the entire system, perpetuating the cycle. There are local authorities who are paving the way. Leeds has introduced family group conferencing, and Hertfordshire has extensive early and family help services which have reduced the numbers of children in care. With more support, time and experience, families could learn to trust social workers again. (But), rebuilding the trust of families and communities will take time.

This context is important to any consideration to the removal of the assurance provided by independent reviewing officers.

Independent reviewing officer South East:

“Love, care, empathy, compassion, the ability to connect and form networks – all have the power to create meaningful, sustained change. We reject the notion that these are qualities incompatible with the IRO's positioning within the LA.

“IROs should be employed as experienced social workers and managers who can show the considerable skill and confidence necessary to champion children's strengths and rights.

“Situating the IRO role outside of the Local Authority could lead to increased bureaucracy, less sensitive management of risk, and disproportionate IRO intervention.

Bettering the life chances and experiences of children in care and care leavers demands that IROs are firmly focused on what is right for every child in care and

care leaver, making collaborative efforts to ensure children's rights and entitlements are preserved.

NIROMP, Manager Network, South East:

"IROs can hold significant memories and details for the children – they hold a helicopter view of all the areas around a child, and a much-valued space for social workers to truly reflect on the child's journey and ambitions for their future.

Charmayne Hartye and Amanda Ankers, Co-Chairs, NIROMP IRO Advisory Group:

"IRO's are often the most consistent professionals in a child's life. Their role enables them to take a step back from the day-to-day work and provide an independent lens on how the child's needs are being met and will be met.

"By IRO's being placed within the local authority they support individual and collective social work practice through their quality assurance function and support the development of social workers.

"It is often connectedness – our relationships – that protect and hold the greatest solutions for positive change on the ground.

Independent Reviewing Officer, South East:

"Under the Brighton and Hove relationship-based model of social work practice, and their 'Me and My World' Model of looked after children's statutory reviews, as an IRO I am enabled to be more flexible and creative about forming a meaningful relationship, and in the functioning of the actual review.

"I have been able to give over the review to the needs and wishes of the young person, recently leading to an interesting theological and cultural discussion with a young Kuwaiti teenager, allowing her to give flight to her feelings about being stateless, about disengaging with her religion and about not keeping up with her language of birth. She sees me not only as a key adult who she can ask for support from, but her review as a forum within which she can explore deep thoughts with trusted adults.

"Other examples include being freed up to position myself as a glorified typist to a young woman, keen to take control of her review to address the list of queries about her care, her needs, and her changing identity.

"I have found myself alongside both parents, social workers, and carer, enjoying Lego and colouring-in competitions in reviews, with the young person inventing the games then timing, judging, and awarding the prizes; this gave

her a wonderful sense of agency and fun, and a space for me to define myself as her IRO.

“I have met young people who have never attended meetings before. I explain that it is their review, their meeting. We meet at the places they feel more comfortable with and invite the people they want involved to join us.

“Meeting in coffee shops, for example, being able to engage the young person in rare and critical conversation for the duration of time the smoothie and cake lasted – invaluable to understand their lived experience, and get myself in front of them in person, and start letting them know what an IRO is / does / can do.

NIROMP Manager Network, West Midlands:

“In my experience, the IRO is often the most consistent professional in the life of a child in care.

“Daily I see examples of the positive difference IROs make, ensuring children receive the support agreed in care plans, challenging drift and delay, intervening to offer support, advice and challenge in times of crisis.

NIROMP Manager Network, South East:

“The IRO is often the professional who brings the most continuity of relationship in a child’s life, holding key information about the child’s journey through care into adulthood.

“IRO’s make sure relationships with siblings are kept, resolutions around lack of education provision or school exclusion and challenges around inappropriate or inadequate care plans.

“Rather than getting rid of the IRO role there are significant arguments to be made for strengthening the role by reducing workloads for IROs, to support their meaningful relationships with children.

“I remain firmly of the view that the role is still best placed with LAs as this enables IROs to have access to information, systems and to build relationships with key professionals that just would not be possible if IRO’s sat outside of the LA.

NIROMP IRO Network, West Midlands:

“In my experience IRO’s have spent years developing relationships with children and young people and they are often the most stable professional relationship that they have. This is more prominent currently where there is a high turnover of social workers which is creating further disruption for children and young people. The fact that they have an IRO who understands the

history, the feelings of the young person and the care plan is of huge significance to many young people that I have worked with, and I feel that this has been underestimated within the document.

Listening to Children and Involving them in decisions

Izzy Martin and Sharon Davey, NIROMP Leadership Network:

“NIROMP have worked hard to listen and respond to the feedback we receive from children, parents, carers, and sector leaders.

“The support for IROs would suggest that we get this right a lot of the time and could still do better. We will continue to listen to all feedback and do all we can to work consistently and more effectively in the interests of getting things right for children and families.

“Our work recognises that the IRO must show that they can hear the child’s views and take them into consideration. This also applies to the other people in the child’s life.

“The IRO’s decision to challenge the plan or the work of the local authority / carer etc. is theirs and it is not always in accordance with the child’s wishes, but will, in the IRO’s view, be in accordance with the best interests and welfare of the child, as well as their human rights.

“To balance the work of the IRO and that of the Local Authority there should be in place a robust system of advocacy for the child which enables them to ensure that their views are carefully represented and considered, and if necessary legal advice gained for the child.

“We are proud of NIROMP’s work to promote advocacy, to understand and address the causes of poor experiences and outcomes for care-experienced children and young people.”

NIROMP IRO Network, West Midlands:

“I feel that the suggestion that an advocacy service could provide the same level of skill and experience is grossly underestimated.

“Our role is not just around putting forward the views of young people, but also ensuring their human rights have not been breached and having the skills

to challenge the Local Authority when there are questions over drift, delay, or welfare issues.

“In my earlier experience of working within front line social work I have not worked with any advocacy service that could provide this level of support and help in the way that an IRO could.

“I would also have real concerns about the task of chairing reviews sitting with Team Managers, as invariably this would mean that the “critical friend” would be removed, and the team would effectively be signing off its own care plan without there being any real opposition or reflective practices at play.

Independent Reviewing Officer, South East:

“To believe that the IRO role can be replaced by an advocate highlights a fundamental misunderstanding of the remit and role. Advocacy is crucial and every child in care should be offered an advocate to support them. However, the IRO role stays vital to assurance that the child’s needs and care arrangements are viewed in the most holistic sense.

NIROMP Manager Network, West Midlands:

“Of course, when caseloads become too high the IRO can be stretched, but, accepting this, the notion that an opt-out advocacy service can replace the work of IROs is astonishingly naïve and would, if implemented, inevitably lead to worsening outcomes for children in care.

Independent Reviewing Officer, North West:

“The IRO plays an incredibly significant role in making sure the child is informed of their Rights, progress chasing the care plan of each child and making sure the child’s care plan meet their assessed needs.

Independent Reviewing Officer, Greater London, said:

“Managers are often managing a case within proceedings and are invested in pursuing what they believe to be the right care plan. This does not allow them to remain independent for the child.

Social work managers have budgets to consider, and the fact is that this sometimes influences decision making.

“The IRO has a level of oversight, expertise and independent scrutiny solely focused upon the child and is in my view, not replaceable by any other means.

Career progression and continuing professional development

NIROMP's Leadership and IRO practitioner networks collaborate continuously with sector leads, consulting on new or proposed innovations and developments in practice. Through our regional networks, a rolling programme of 'Community of Practice' events, we are strengthening the experience and skills of the IRO workforce to make sure scarce resources are used in ways that are likely to have the greatest impact.

Independent reviewing officers have considerable experience, skill, and knowledge. They have the confidence to understand the different forms of exploitation & extra familial harm.

NIROMP runs a regular programme of Community of Practice online sessions for IROs and their managers.

Sharon Keenan and Kim Burrowes, NIROMP Leadership Network:

"NIROMP's regional networks provide an important space for support and independent consultation for IRO practitioners as well as IRO managers.

"Our regular meetings and Communities of Practice sessions address the values of the IRO, sharing knowledge, skills, and bringing in academics to share the latest research.

"This approach to collaboration has enabled NIROMP to create bespoke training and developmental opportunities, for free to independent reviewing officers and their managers across all the regions of England.

"Recently we held a Community of Practice session on extra-familial harm and extended the invite to Child Protection Conference Chairs.

"IROs and their managers can use NIROMP network meetings and community of practice sessions to show their continuing professional development.

Developing strategic intelligence to better understand the cost and efficacy of care provision

IROs are familiar with the council's economic pressures, culture, political makeup, personnel, and processes. Their relationships, knowledge base and positioning as 'reviewers and scrutineers' allows them a more strategic view. This lens is considerable; they have a valued grasp on need, services, and how well outcomes are being met.

IROs hold a wealth of information about practice, including what works and does not work on a child by child or collective basis. One of our aims is to find better ways to pass that evidence to leaders / commissioners of services, to support improvements to commissioning practice and reduction of costs.

As NIROMP Chair:

"IROs hold a valuable intelligence base to support both better contract management – understanding the efficacy of provision, and justification for using certain types of provision, as well as understanding what needs are not being met.

"Their position within the Local Authority, enables IROs to understand, interpret and support the implementation of new policy, changes in expectations, structural change, and even changes in context in the local area.

"Managers and practitioners getting their heads around new policy, the transition from old ways of working within LAs to new can be difficult. Change brings uncertainty on what it may mean for practice. IROs, in their oversight and leadership role, are in a pivotal position to scrutinise and support transformational change.

Sharon Martin, NIROMP Chair

Press Office

Please direct all press enquiries to niromp@outlook.com

Notes to editors

[1] NIROMP formed originally in 2004 as a 'working group' made up of IRO Managers who worked on behalf of the Department for Education (DfE) to produce the IRO Handbook. The guidance is part of a suite of statutory guidance setting out how local authorities should undertake the full range of responsibilities for looked after children.

[2] More about NIROMP's membership and structure is available via its self-hosted website:

<https://niromp.org/about-us-2/>

[3] NIROMP Strategic Vision and Priorities 2019-2022 can be downloaded by our website:

<https://smad6740.files.wordpress.com/2019/07/niromp-strategic-vision-priorities-2019-22-pdf-1.pdf>

[4] In May 2022, the Contextual Safeguarding programme published recommendations to Ofsted, DfE and to NIROMP: [Securing Safety Policy Recommendations](#) and [Key things to consider for the out of area placement of a young person who is at risk of harm beyond their family](#).