

Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

6th January 2015

Performance of the Independent Reviewing Service in Warwickshire – Update

Recommendation

That the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee note the performance of the Independent Reviewing Service (IRS) in Warwickshire and the actions being taken to address the recruitment difficulties.

1.0 Background

- 1.1 The Committee received a report in January 2014 that provided a detailed summary of the statutory functions of the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO). This report provided an update on the performance of the service and the actions being taken to address the recruitment difficulties.

2.0 The IRO Service

- 2.1 The team currently consists of a group of nine full- time Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO), one Operations Manager who are all social work qualified and registered with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) and a team of administrative support. There are currently two full- time IRO vacancies. The team are based in Warwick and have responsibility for chairing all child protection conferences and the statutory reviews for all looked after children who are the responsibility of Warwickshire County Council.
- 2.2 The statutory guidance requires that the service is line managed separately from operational teams in order to maintain independence from the case management decision making and resource allocation processes. The team were recently transferred to the Professional Practice and Governance Business Unit which supports this requirement.
- 2.3 Whilst staff retention is good, recruitment to additional posts has been difficult. One IRO left earlier in the year to take up an equivalent post in an authority where the salary is greater and another has retired.

- 2.4 Reviewing Officers continue to have particular areas of specialism i.e. adoption, leaving care. In this way they can contribute towards service developments in key areas and also act as a source of specialist knowledge and advice for colleagues, other agencies and social workers.
- 2.5 The reviews of children placed in residential care specifically to meet their educational needs, are now undertaken across the team due to the previous IRO who specialised in this area, leaving employment with the county council.
- 2.6 The service is represented on a number of departmental service development groups and fully contributes to the strategic objectives of Warwickshire Safeguarding Children Board (WSCB).

3.0 Contribution to Business Unit and Group Objectives

- 3.1 The overall purpose of the Independent Reviewing Service is to contribute to improved outcomes for looked after children on a case by case basis but also to contribute towards People Group objectives aimed at improving outcomes for looked after children.
- 3.2 The work of the Service over the current year has continued to focus on the following areas in support of these objectives.
 - 1. To keep children safe from harm
 - 2. To safely reduce the numbers of looked after children and children subject to child protection plans by evidenced based programmes of intervention
 - 3. The continuous professional development of staff through an MA programme with Birmingham University.
 - 4. Scrutiny of care plans and child protection plans including the introduction of a RAG system for child protection planning which identifies and seeks resolution to blocks in individual child protection plans.

4.0 Regional and National Developments

- 4.1 The team continues to actively contribute to the work plan of the regional IRO group, with the Operations Manager in the role of Chair.
- 4.2 A post-qualifying programme of study with Birmingham University specifically tailored to Independent Reviewing Officers, is now in its second year with two members of the team on the programme. This will inform national developments in this area.
- 4.3 The regional IRO group continues to feed directly into the national group with a reciprocity and synergy of work programmes aimed at raising standards in

the service generally and acting as a direct consultative group for the Department for Education.

- 4.4 The team participated in a research study undertaken by the National Children's Bureau regarding the effectiveness of the role of the IRO. This has assisted in the identification of areas of good practice already in place and areas for further development.

5.0 Children and Families Court Advisory Service (CAFCASS)

- 5.1 There are two distinct areas in which the IRO is expected to work in conjunction with CAFCASS:
1. As part of family proceedings when the child is looked after; and
 2. When an IRO makes a referral to CAFCASS as part of the formal escalation process.
- 5.2 This is underpinned by a joint protocol between Warwickshire and Coventry IRO services and both legal departments to ensure consistency of approach within the local shared family court system, which continues to work well.

6.0 Quantitative information about the IRO Service

- 6.1 The guidance specifies caseloads of 50 - 70 looked after children per IRO. This has not been achieved in Warwickshire due to the number of children who are looked after. The service has focused on developing systems, processes and interrelationships that enable implementation of the guidance within current resources.
- 6.2 Whilst there has been an overall decrease in the numbers of children requiring a formal plan at the end of the year, the in-year activity has increased. The table below shows a comparison of verified data which is only available at the end of the financial year.

	31 March 2012	31 March 2013	31 March 2014
Children subject to CP plans	534	550	528
Looked after children	681	698	690
Total	1215	1284	1218

- 6.3 The team is also responsible for the continuing reviews of all children who are 16/17 and were previously looked after children. At 31st March 2014 this amounted to **20** children.

- 6.4 The team is also responsible for chairing the annual reviews of all children placed in Residential schools (**28**) to ensure their educational provision remains appropriate and to ensure their care arrangements are appropriate to the child's needs.
- 6.5 This requires the team to facilitate as a minimum 2,600 meetings in a year.
- 6.6 The location of placements varies as does the type of placement. There is therefore a significant team pressure in terms of travel and costs given the overall size of the county and the number of young people placed out of county.
- 6.7 If combined numbers of children are calculated (CP and LAC) each IRO is currently responsible for on average 140 children subject to either a care plan or protection plan or sometimes both. If both vacant posts could be recruited to total numbers would still average out at 115 per IRO. The statutory guidance recommends an average of 70 looked after children per IRO.
- 6.8 Whilst performance in relation to the numbers of child protection conferences held within the statutory timescale remains good this can be seen to mask the difficulties in practice. There is a decrease in performance of the minutes from the child protection conference being distributed to parents and agencies within the required timeframes and sometimes an inability to respond to an operational request to bring a conference forward as a result of changed circumstances or a need to dispense with a child protection plan early. This results in children possibly remaining subject to a plan for longer than is appropriate.
- 6.9 Given the overall caseloads, rising numbers of both Looked After Children and child protection work and the vacancies, it has not been possible to fully meet all of the requirements of the regulatory guidance.
- 6.10 The area of work within the statutory reviewing processes that are most affected is the ability to produce minutes within the required timeframes and the availability of time to meet young people separately if they choose not to attend their reviews.

7.0 Qualitative information about the IRO service

- 7.1 Despite the team carrying vacancies for two IRO full-time equivalent posts performance in key areas has remained good in comparison with national data. Some highlights are listed below and relate to data at March 31st 2014:

		2013	2014	England Average 2014
CP	% of Child protection reviews held within timeframes	99.3%	97.8%	94.6%
LAC	% of Statutory reviews held within timeframes	91.40%	92.6%	Not published by DfE
CP	% of Conferences held within 15 days of the strategy meeting	93.3%	100%	69.3%
CP	% of children subject to a second or third child protection plan	13.30%	16.8%	15.8%
LAC	% of looked after children who participated in their review	98%	97.9%	Not published by DfE

8.0 Dispute resolution and scrutiny of Care Plans

- 8.1 One of the key functions of the Independent Reviewing Officer is to resolve any problems arising out of the care planning process that may impact on the progression of the care plan for the child.
- 8.2 All authorities are therefore required to have in place formal dispute resolution processes to ensure that resolutions are reached in a timely way. These processes should also enable the service to evidence its impact on improved outcomes for looked after children young people.
- 8.3 In order for this function to be undertaken effectively, it is important that the IRO service is able to demonstrate high standards of practice and performance in the undertaking of its functions.

9.0 Areas for Further Development

- 9.1 The IRO service in Warwickshire contributed to a national research project with the National Children's Bureau to test the effectiveness of the IRO role. The outcome of this research is helping to inform future service developments.
- 9.2 The research project identified areas of good practice but also that Warwickshire pays comparably less than other local authorities.

10.0 Key Challenges

- 10.1 The ongoing challenges to the service have been the ability to meet the full requirements of the regulations in the face of current workloads. Increased responsibilities for the IRO in ensuring the effective care planning within new timescales introduced by the Children and Families Act 2014 and increasing activity within the looked after children and child protection populations will exacerbate this issue. These considerable challenges will be addressed within existing resources

11.0 Conclusions

- 11.1 Despite recruitment challenges, the Independent Reviewing Service in Warwickshire has maintained good performance in key areas of work over the last year and also made significant developments within the service.
- 11.2 The statutory guidance has been implemented with integrity in the context of current resources. Full compliance with the guidance has not been fully achieved due to the rising numbers of statutory cases.

12.0 Update on work undertaken to improve the grading and salary issues

- 12.1 Following the report in January 2014, further analysis was undertaken to understand the likely effectiveness of the market supplement. In collaboration with Human Resources work focused on maximising the effectiveness of the recruitment campaigns and to identify the pay differentials across the region. This work was also required as part of the application for a market supplement.
- 12.2 Whilst this was ongoing, recruitment campaigns continued, resulting in an internal recruitment to one post. However, during this period, a member of the team took up employment as an IRO role in a neighbouring authority, with a salary increase.
- 12.3 At this juncture, a market forces application is being prepared whilst longer-term options are explored as a market supplement is not a permanent option. It is anticipated that the application will be completed by the end of January 2015.
- 12.4 The policy states that "Market supplements will normally be applied for a period of two years. However they will be reviewed after 18 months has elapsed and consequently will be withdrawn should the review demonstrate that current evidence does not justify a supplementary payment continuing." And: "Market supplements should be clearly indicated in job adverts and the employment terms to prospective or current employees."
- 12.5 In order to permanently resolve the recruitment issues for the IRO service, further work is being undertaken between the Professional Practice and Governance Business Unit and Human Resources to consider ways in which to achieve this as swiftly as possible.

Background papers:

Performance of the IRO Service January 2014

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