



CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Tuesday, 21 June 2022

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| REPORT TITLE: | INDEPENDENT REVIEWING SERVICE ANNUAL REPORT 2021/22 |
| REPORT OF: | DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND EDUCATION |

REPORT SUMMARY

Since March 2010 there is a requirement that the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) service within each local authority produce an Annual Report of activity, with regards to children looked after (CLA).

The purpose of the IRO Annual Report, which is attached at appendix 1 is to evaluate the extent to which Wirral Council has fulfilled its responsibilities to its Children Looked After for the period 1 April 2021 – 31 March 2022.

This report is to provide an overview to the Children Young People and Education Committee for scrutiny and comment.

This report is aligned to the Wirral Plan 2021-26 priority: Working together for brighter futures for our children, young people, and their families by breaking the cycle of poor outcomes for all regardless of their background.

This affects all wards but is not a key decision.

RECOMMENDATION/S

The Children, Young People and Education Committee is recommended to:

1. Review and scrutinise the information contained in the IRO Annual Report attached at appendix 1, and agree it as published.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1.1 The role and function of the Safeguarding Unit and the Independent Reviewing Officers is governed by law and statutory guidance. Each Local Authority has a legal requirement to provide an Independent Reviewing Officer for every child or young person looked after, fundamentally to ensure their Human Rights are respected.
- 1.2 The purpose of this report is to evaluate the extent to which Wirral Council has fulfilled its responsibilities to our children looked after for the period 1 April 2021 – 31 March 2022, including its corporate parenting function.

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 2.1 It is a statutory requirement for the Independent Reviewing Service to produce an annual report.

3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

3.1 Role of the Safeguarding Unit

- 3.2 The overall aim of the Safeguarding Unit is to ensure that children looked after are safe, secure and achieve the best possible outcomes. Independent Reviewing Officers have high aspirations for their future and encourage children and young people to express their views, wishes and feelings. The Service aims to ensure that all children and young people are supported to access services and are fully prepared for adulthood.

- 3.3 Supplemental to the core roles, an IRO has responsibility to support children and young people who are privately fostered. These children and young people are identified in accordance with The Private Fostering Regulations as set out in Part 9 and schedule 8 of the Children Act 1989. There were 4 identified during this reporting year.

- 3.4 Service Managers within the Unit are also required to chair Sudden or Unexpected Death in Infancy and Childhood Meetings (SUDIC) in line with Working Together 2015 and Wirral's Safeguarding Partnership procedures, along with Secure Accommodation Reviews (SAR) and Suspected Fabricated or Induced illness strategy meetings.

3.5 Key Performance Data

- 3.6 As of March 2022, Wirral had 810 children looked after. The overall number has decreased from 841 on 31 March 2021. This decrease has been in part because of 29% of children returning to their parents, and a further 12% reaching 18 during that period. In addition, data shows that Wirral is now in line with the statutory neighbours in the number of children who are becoming looked after. This indicates timely responses to children is appropriate with children coming into care at the right time.

- 3.7 Just under half of all children and young people looked after (43%) are aged between 13-18. Approximately 89.7% are white British with the other 10.3% from a variety of other ethnic backgrounds. 10% are recorded as having a disability.
- 3.8 During the reporting period (2021-22) a total of 1682 children looked after review meetings were held. These review meetings are held every 6 months and therefore each child looked after will have their care plan reviewed twice per year. 95% of CLA reviews have been held in within statutory timescales and reflect the hard work and commitment of the Independent Reviewing Officers.
- 3.9 When a child looked after reaches 15 years and six months old, they become a subject to guidance around leaving care. The local authority will ensure a Pathway Plan which sets out the young person's plans and what support is needed as they leave the care of the local authority. For the reporting period, a total of 354 Pathway Plans were reviewed and 82% of reviews were held within the required timescale. 18% were held out of time due to significant changes in the care plan or the carer / child requesting the review be rearranged. These reviews, whilst out of time, were all completed within 1 week of the original due date.

3.10 Quality Assurance

- 3.11 Quality assurance and learning improvement activity has continued during the past 12 months with all planned activity being delivered, to ensure senior management oversight of the quality of service being delivered. IRO's contribute to bi-monthly case file audits along with the Safeguarding Unit managers conducting monthly audits.

3.12 Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO)

- 3.13 The LADO has a specific function in overseeing the allegations and investigations relating to professional staff and those in a position of trust where the allegations involve children and young people. Wirral has one full time Designated Officer. The table below shows the number of contacts to the LADO and the number of referrals leading to multi-agency strategy meeting or discussion.

| Types of contact | Total number of contacts | Number of referrals leading to multi-agency strategy meeting or discussion |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| Initial consultation form | - 159 | 131 |
| Referral form | - 140 | |
| Total | - 299 | |

- 3.14 Most referrals were in relation to Foster Carers and education which accounted for 64% of the referrals.

3.15 Escalations

- 3.16 One of the key functions of the IRO is to resolve problems arising out of the care planning process.
- 3.17 Over the last year there has been 170 formal escalations raised. Most of these escalations (75%) were raised due to concerns regarding drift and delay and statutory requirements not being met. The number of formal escalations completed has increased this year with only 97 being completed the previous year. However, given the number of children looked after in Wirral, it would be expected that more formal escalations are being raised. There is ongoing work to address this issue.

3.18 Impact of Covid 19

- 3.19 During 2021-22, the Coronavirus pandemic continued to impact upon the work within the Safeguarding Unit and continued to present challenges. It was established from feedback that virtual meetings, especially for Initial Child Protection Conferences (ICPCs) were not supportive of engagement with families. Virtual meetings also presented risks around confidentiality along with a lack of emotional support for families following the meeting.
- 3.20 Over the past year the Unit has worked hard to identify a suitable venue for hybrid meetings to be held safely despite the challenge from COVID. The Safeguarding Unit is holding all ICPCs at Rock Ferry with the IRO, minute taker, allocated social worker and family present in the meeting. Other professionals have the option of joining the meeting virtually however we are now encouraging other agencies to join in person. The ICPC's have been running in a hybrid format since 28/2/22 and feedback has been positive.

3.21 Key Priorities 2022-23

- 3.22 There are 5 key priorities the Unit is working towards in the coming year these include:
- Provide children with a variety of methods to participate in their review and encourage physical attendance
 - Ensure all children understand the role of the IRO and what the child looked after review meeting is about
 - Maintain audit and quality assurance activity to improve practice standards and support improved practice across children's social care
 - Improve the progress in children and young people's care plans to prevent drift and delay
 - Focus on achieving permanency at the second review

4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 There are no financial implications arising directly from this report.

5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 An annual report of the Independent Reviewing Service (IRO) for looked after children is required in accordance with the Children and Young Person's Act 2008 and subsequent statutory guidance published by the Department for Children Schools and Families in 2010 as set out in the IRO handbook

6.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS

- 6.1 There are no resource implications arising directly from this report.

7.0 RELEVANT RISKS

- 7.1 There are no relevant risks arising directly from this report.

8.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

- 8.1 The primary objective of the IRO service is to ensure that children and young people are included in the decisions made about them and they actively participate in their meetings. 85% of children and young people participated in the reviews in some form this year and 38% physically attended the review.
- 8.2 Within the reporting period 2021/22, 87 children looked after were supported by Barnardo's in the form of Advocacy or from an Independent Visitor.
- 8.3 A child friendly report will be written and shared with out children and young people.
- 8.4 This report will be shared with our staff and key stakeholders at the Corporate Parenting Board.

9.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 Wirral Council has a legal requirement to make sure its policies, and the way it carries out its work, do not discriminate against anyone. An Equality Impact Assessment is a tool to help council services identify steps they can take to ensure equality for anyone who might be affected by a particular policy, decision, or activity. An EIA has been completed and can be found here <https://www.wirral.gov.uk/communities-and-neighbourhoods/equality-impact-assessments>

10.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 There are no environment and climate implications arising from this report. However, it is important for our children and young people to understand environmental and climate implications. The IROs oversee how as a Local Authority the corporate parenting responsibilities are discharged including how a holistic approach is undertaken when caring for our children to have a broad understanding of the environment and climate.

11.0 COMMUNITY WEALTH IMPLICATIONS

11.1 One of the responsibilities of the IROs is to oversee the plans of the Local Authority to support our young people into education and to be ready to enter the employment market. Children Looked After with the right support and encouragement will make a significant contribution to the wealth and wellbeing of the local community.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1- IRO Annual Report 2021/22

BACKGROUND PAPERS

The IRO Handbook

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

| Council Meeting | Date |
|-----------------|------|
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