



CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE & EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 16 October 2024

REPORT TITLE:	INDEPENDENT REVIEWING SERVICE ANNUAL REPORT
REPORT OF:	DIRECTOR FOR 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 2023 – 31 March 2024.

This report provides 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 requested to:

1. Review and scrutinise the information contained in the IRO Annual Report attached at appendix 1.
2. Approve the publication of the Independent Reviewing Service Annual Report.

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 2023 – 31 March 2024, 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

Role of the Safeguarding Unit

- 3.1 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.
- 3.2 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.
- 3.3 Operational Leads within the Unit are also required to chair Sudden or Unexpected Death in Infancy and Childhood Meetings, SUDIC, in line with Working Together 2023 and Wirral's Safeguarding Partnership procedures, along with Secure Accommodation Reviews (SAR) and Suspected Fabricated or Induced illness strategy meetings.

Key Performance Data

- 3.4 In relation to the children in care we serve, as of March 2024 Wirral had 766 looked after. The overall number has decreased from 810 on 31 March 2023. Most children and young people (46%) are aged between 13-18.
- 3.5 88% are white British and 12% from a variety of other ethnic backgrounds. At the time of this report, there are slightly more boys than girls in our care with boys representing approximately 55% of the cared for population.

- 3.6 The number of Children Looked After by Wirral has remained largely consistent throughout the year. We have however seen a steady decrease in the numbers from February and March 2024. The majority of these children (33%) left care to return to parents, relatives or other family members. This can be viewed as an illustration of positive planning for children who ultimately return to live with family.
- 3.7 During the reporting period 1695 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. 91% of CLA reviews have been held in within statutory timescales and reflect the hard work and commitment of the Independent Reviewing Officers.
- 3.8 When a Looked After Child reaches 15 years and six months old, they become a 'Care Leaver'. The Local Authority will initiate their Pathway Plan. There are two parts to a Pathway Plan. Part 1 is all about what the young person needs, leaving care assessment of need, and part 2 is all about their goals and plans. The young person's first Pathway Plan will be completed by their 16th birthday. For this year a total of 734 Pathway Plans were reviewed

What our children and families tell us.

- 3.9 Over 2023 and 2024 our IRO service has received some wonderful feedback. This is captured in a variety of ways including visits, conversations with practitioners and professional and from a QR code which is provided to families following meetings.

From this data there are key themes of what families find helpful that can be identified from the feedback which include:

- Advice given being appreciated
- The child being at the centre of decisions made
- The child's needs being the priority
- The IRO being supportive, empathic, knowledgeable, approachable and listening to the families
- The meetings being balanced with concerns for the child and hearing the parents and carers

Quality Assurance

- 4.0 The IRO's role is pivotal in providing independent monitoring of the child's care plan to ensure the children and young people achieve positive outcomes. In Wirral IRO's complete a Midpoint Review, between Looked After Reviews, whereby they hold a meeting with the allocated social worker and discuss progression of the plan and whether recommendations from the previous review have been completed. This not only evidences their footprint but also allows them to discuss any gaps with the social worker and consider whether an escalation is required.

For 2023/24 1082 mid-point reviews have been completed.

Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO)

- 4.1 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.

Total number of Contacts (see definition)	Outcome for cases that were Substantiated
Initial Consultations 295 Substantiated 51 (38%)	20 referred to DBS

Escalations

- 4.2 One of the key functions of the IRO is to resolve problems arising out of the care planning process.
- 4.3 Over the last year we have seen 302 formal escalations raised. The majority of these escalations (75%) were raised due to concerns regarding drift and delay and Statutory requirements not being met. We have also raised 342 informal escalations.

4.4 Key Priorities 2024-2025

- 4.5 There are 4 key priorities the Unit is working towards in the coming year these include:

1. The Impact IROs have in driving forward children and young people's care planning.
2. Challenge and dispute resolution.
3. Participation and engagement.
4. Contribution to Quality Assurance

5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

IROs are responsible for ensuring that our children and young people have the right plan in place. Should a child be in the wrong placement this can lead to multiple breakdowns and moves. Not only is the impact of this damaging to the child, the financial impact of the wrong plan is also high. Thus, evidencing the need for IROs to have clear oversight and ensure that they are driving the right plan forward. There is increased need for IRO's to assess placement sufficiency when considering placement matches for children and where safe to do so, focus on rehabilitating children to the care of their families.

6.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 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.

7.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS

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

7.0 RELEVANT RISKS

- 7.1 The work outlined within the report highlights how CYP directorate risks are being managed and mitigated.

8.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

- 8.1 A key part of the IRO role is to ensure that children have been consulted about their views and have their wishes and feelings given due consideration in plans for their care. During the global pandemic we took the decision that this would take place using virtual methods and this was carried out in a variety of ways by IROs ringing carers and young people and arranging video calls or telephone calls. During 2023/24 we continued to use these methods however, this year IROs have focused upon encouraging our children to participate in face-to-face visits and attend their meetings in person. Thus, ensuring that maintaining meaningful relationships with children is underpinned by practice that promotes this.

867 visits have been undertaken to our children. 92 children were referred to the Barnardo's service for advocacy support.

9.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 Within the annual report the disparity our families face on Wirral is discussed. The Office for National Statistics data about income deprivation (December 2022) revealed that Wirral is the 38th most income deprived LA area (out of 316). And, of the 206 neighbourhoods in Wirral, 65 were among the 20 per cent most income-deprived in England. However, 27 neighbourhoods were in the 20 per cent least income-deprived in England, highlighted the disparity which exists across the borough. How we deliver our services is responsive to this and our presence and the support provided to these localities is understandably higher.

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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Appendix 1-

IRO Annual Report 2023/24

BACKGROUND PAPERS

The IRO Handbook

TERMS OF REFERENCE

This report is being considered by the Children, Young People and Education Committee in accordance with section a of its Terms of Reference:

1. Exercising management, oversight and delivery of services to children and young people in relation to their care, wellbeing, education or health, with the exception of any powers reserved to full Council.

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date