

Report	Independent Reviewing Officers Safeguarding and Quality Unit
For	Corporate Parenting Panel – September 2021
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1. Purpose and Context

This report is presented as a method of fulfilling the Independent Reviewing Officers' statutory duty to "monitor the activity of the local authority acting as a good corporate parent." (Welsh Government: Part 6 Code of Practice, Paragraph 371).

The report measures progress against recommendations made by the Independent Reviewing Officers to the Corporate Parenting Panel in March 2018.

2. Recommendations and Progress

Improvement Objective (noted in March 2018):	Recommendations (noted in March 2018):	Progress
Quality of assessments of Looked After Children.	Each Looked After Child must have an up to date assessment of their needs on file - including a pen picture of each child: They should be updated on a regular basis i.e. at least annually.	<p>Following previous discussions in the Corporate Parenting Panel, the Independent Reviewing Officers welcomed the instructions given by managers that it should be ensured that every child has an up-to-date assessment by the end of January 2020.</p> <p>For the purpose of this report, a child is considered to have a current assessment if conducted in 2020 or 2021.</p> <p>In preparing this report, the Independent Reviewing Officers have looked at a sample of 20 cases, and 11 of the children did not have a current assessment (55%). Therefore, this remains an area of concern.</p>

		<p>It is also noted that some of the assessments which were regarded as “up to date” for the purpose of this report did not reflect the considerable changes some of the children have experienced since the completion of their assessment.</p> <p>A report is presently being written by the Practice and Quality Improvement Officer which will include consideration of quality of assessments. The Independent Reviewing Offices will meet the Practice and Quality Improvement Officer upon completion of report and, if appropriate, provide relevant information in our next report to Corporate Parenting Panel.</p>
<p>Care and Support Plans in place – which focus on desired outcomes, interventions to meet those outcomes, and timescales. Robust review and monitoring of implementation and the difference made</p>	<p>Up-to-date Care and Support Plans must be put in place for each child.</p>	<p>Following previous discussions in the Corporate Parenting Panel, managers instructed that LAC Reviews should be cancelled unless a Part 6 Care and Support Plan has been submitted to the Independent Reviewing Officers in advance.</p> <p>This process has been reviewed to ensure improved compliance with regulatory requirements and practice standards. The Review now receives a report from the Social Worker and a copy of the current Part 6 Care and Support Plan (which has not</p>

		<p>been updated). The Part 6 Care and Support Plan is updated following the review, giving an opportunity to incorporate relevant matters arising from the Review. Progress on updating the Part 6 Care and Support Plan will be included in our next report to Panel.</p> <p>During the period between 1 June 2020 and 23 July 2021, summary reports were received in 43 out of 47 LAC Reviews (91%). It is noted that, despite being presented timely, one report was returned to the Social Worker due to insufficient information. It is noted most reports were received on the day of the LAC Review or the previous day. One was not presented until after the meeting component of the LAC Review process had been held. Several of the Social Workers apologised for the late presentation of their report, citing pressure of work as the reason. The corresponding percentage in our previous report was 91% and 97% for two respective periods during which data was collected.</p> <p>This is considerable progress in comparison to what was previously reported in our reports to Corporate Parenting Panel.</p> <p>The Independent Reviewing Officers believe support</p>
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<p>Thorough review and monitoring of implementation and difference made.</p>	<p>Preparation for reviews must be improved and information provided which allows the child's plan to be scrutinised and progressed.</p>	<p>The Independent Reviewing Officers welcome the commitment by Children and Families Service to review the template of the Part 6 Care and Support Plan. It is hoped this will lead to a less repetitive form that will be more child-centred. The Independent Reviewing Officers hope Children and Families Service will view this task as one of its priorities.</p> <p>The high number of summary reports presented prior to LAC Reviews is helpful to both the Social Workers and the Independent Reviewing Officers in their preparation work.</p>
<p>Quality and consistency of record keeping.</p>	<p>Recording statutory visits – to show an understanding of the requirements, and the record counter signed by both the child and the carer.</p>	<p>The Independent Reviewing Officers remain of the opinion that maintaining case records has been consistently good for some time now. It is understood systems are in place to monitor the recording. As with assessments, the Practice and Quality Improvement Officer is preparing a report which will include consideration of case recording. The Independent Reviewing Officers will meet the</p>

		<p>Practice and Quality Improvement Officer upon completion of report and, if appropriate, provide relevant information in our next report to Corporate Parenting Panel.</p>
<p>Acute focus on Permanency Planning for Looked after Children to reduce the numbers of children being looked after – Complete the cases that require revocation of the Orders: and identify all cases where a Special Guardianship Order (SGO) may be appropriate and focus on progressing those cases.</p>	<p>Progression of permanency plans for a number of children where SGO arrangements would be a better outcome.</p>	<p>The Independent Reviewing Officers continue to attend Permanent Care Planning meetings. The Independent Reviewing Officers feel this leads to sharing information in a timely manner, allowing scrutiny and avoiding cases to drift.</p> <p>The Independent Reviewing Officers welcome the commitment by Children and Families Services to review its policy on Special Guardianship Orders. The Independent Reviewing Officers are of the view the Service has been pro-active in all relevant cases where Special Guardianship Orders could be considered.</p> <p>Post-16 Pathway Plan: The Independent Reviewing Officers presented a specific report to the last Corporate Parenting Panel on the progress of Post-16 Pathway Plans. Progress will be noted in our next report.</p>

Service response to the above:

The response is provided at the end of the report.

3. Reviews

LAC Review process have continued using a variety of virtual media. Whereas this has advantages in being able to continue to hold meetings and seeing children and key adults over the screen, there is also a huge disadvantage not to have a face-to-face conversation with children.

A total of 120 LAC Reviews were held between 1 April 2021 and 23 July 2021. A total of 118 (98%) were within statutory timescales. One was postponed due to lack of report, and the other had to be postponed due to the Social Worker being on annual leave, and the Practice Leader who had planned to attend had to be present in Court at short notice.

The Independent Reviewing Officers have been aware for some time of the need to provide the record of the Review in a timelier manner, i.e. to provide the recommendations of the Review within the required timescale. From a random sample of 60 LAC Reviews, the full record was shared in 59 cases (98%) within 20 working days. We have also started to review the record of the review process so that it is written to the child.

4. A child centred approach

We are committed to developing our approach as Independent Reviewing Officers to ensure that we are focused on the child and the child's review process: amplifying their voice within the service where required. We refer the panel to the recent commendation of our work by the Care Inspectorate Wales.

Independent Reviewing and Safeguarding officers (IRSO's) are demonstrating their confidence to challenge and escalate any drift in practice or any practice not meeting expectations. They have a strong focus on ensuring children's voices are heard and using creative means to ensure engagement with children continues throughout ongoing challenges to service delivery. Their emphasis rightly remains on local resolution of deficits and ensuring best outcomes for children as individuals. The local authority will want to continue to build the confidence of IRSO's and recognise their strength and internal challenge as an asset.

As Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) we are tasked to ensure that the plans for children in care are robust and focused on the needs of the child, and that the plans are carried through in a timely manner. We conduct this task through a reviewing and monitoring process. This is a highly complex process requiring the possession of a wide spectrum of knowledge, and a variety of skills. A key requirement of the role is that we work in a Child Centred Way. This means that we:

- Communicate with children in an age appropriate way, about their wishes and feelings. This will include the capacity to communicate with children with learning difficulties, or other communication problems
- Make arrangements for the review process that are based on the needs and wishes of the child
- Conduct the review in a manner that places the child at the centre of the process.

As an IRO service we are wanting to bring a new approach to the traditional reviewing process. A key question for us is how best to hold the child at the centre of the care planning and reviewing process. Under the leadership of the Service Manager, we are developing a Trauma Informed Approach to our work. To do so we are further developing our

- Understanding of the impact of developmental trauma, of normative child development and what helps build safety into our interactions with children and adults.
- Understanding of communication to connect to help create a sense of safety for the child and family
- Ability to create conditions where trust can develop.
- Ability to create certainty within the review process - feeling of safety and predictability.
- Resources to allow for interactions that can help nurture a less intimidating experience for children and families.

One IRO has successfully completed the Level 5 Diploma in Trauma and Mental Health Informed Schools, and will be piloting a new way of conducting child-focuses LAC Reviews in the near future, as well as sharing learning with colleagues. In September, we will be holding learning sessions, mentored by Dr Coral Harper, to

- Learn more about how to recognise and sensitively respond to people who have experienced trauma.
- Reflect on our practice and to take away some practical tools to help us respond in a more trauma informed way.
- Create a personal action plan.
- Identify what support we need to put the personal action plan in place

The Service Manager would be happy to attend this Panel to share, and be challenged, on the work undertaken to strengthen the IRO service.

5. Invitation to quarterly meetings

Arrangements have been in place for some time for holding quarterly meetings between the Independent Reviewing Officers and the Service Manager. The meetings are constructive and a means of collaborating to improve practice. The following discussions have taken place. The most recent meeting was held on 23 April 2021, with the next planned for 9 September 2021. During the discussion in April, the following was discussed:

a) There is a requirement for all Looked After Children to have Life Journey Work. This should assist the children to gain insight into what has happened to them and why they are looked after. Children and Families Service shared with the Independent Reviewing Officers

a Social Worker has been appointed within North Wales Adoption Service to lead on this work. A meeting was arranged soon afterwards between the Independent Reviewing Officers and the Social Worker, as there are duties within the LAC Review process to ensure this work is conducted. As Independent Reviewing Officers, we urge practitioners to be creative when undertaking this work – and not solely rely on written work and pictures. The use of videos, memory teddies made from materials from their birth home, tapes of the voices of birth parents etc are some ideas of how to support a child to understand the meaning of their life journey.

b) Independent Reviewing Officers expressed their unease with Children's Services decision to conduct virtual rather than face to face contact from January onwards due to the pandemic. Whilst fully acknowledging the risks, the Independent Reviewing Officers did not receive individual risk assessments evidencing specific risks within cases, or consideration of potential mitigation. The challenge was around ensuring that there had been individual consideration of each case based on risk and necessity and that we avoided at all costs the intention or impression that this was a blanket policy.

(c) Independent Reviewing Officers referred to difficulties in accessing key documents such as Court Orders etc on the electronic filing system used by Children and Families Service.

(d) It was agreed the Independent Reviewing Officers would receive a copy of the minutes of the Resource Panel meeting. This enable timely information sharing about resource decisions made for children. It is positive to say the minutes are now shared, and the arrangement proves beneficial in terms of enabling ongoing monitoring of cases.

(e) It was noted one Independent Reviewing Officer has attended a Public Law Reform webinar. Local Authorities will be expected to manage complex child protection cases without Court Orders. This has implications for day to day work, and potential for less scrutiny as the LAC Review process will not apply.

6. Consistency of Social Workers

The Independent Reviewing Officers have stated in previous reports to the Corporate Parenting Panel that they are concerned about staff turnover, and this has led to changes in Social Workers whilst receiving support from the Children and Families' Service. It is always advantageous for children to know their Social Workers sufficiently well as to be able to trust them with often traumatic, painful and confidential matters. Continuity in Social Workers also provides a thorough understanding of the issues, and can lead to avoidance of drift.

For this report, the Independent Reviewing Officers have considered the number of cases where there has been a change of Social Worker since the previous statutory review.

In a sample of 43 LAC Reviews, the child remained allocated to the same Social Worker as at the previous LAC Review in 32 cases (74%). The Independent Reviewing Officers report to the March Panel quoted two percentages for consistency in Social Workers during different periods, namely 80% and 76.6%.

The cases where there was a different Social Worker have been considered. One was on account of maternity leave; two Social Workers have left the employment of Children and Families Services, and there was an internal team transfer to the 16 plus team. It is noted

one child had three different Social Workers within 5 months. Nonetheless, efforts were seen to allocate a Social Worker who already knew the child e.g. a Social Worker who had worked with a child as prior to qualifying. Some of the changes were necessitated by the illness of one Social Worker. In one LAC Review the Practice Leader was holding the case until it could be allocated, therefore providing continuity.

The Independent Reviewing Officers welcome the commitment made by Children and Families Service, where there is a change of Social Worker for a child, the case remains allocated to the same practice group. Accordingly, the same Practice Leader should continue to have oversight of the work.

7. Statutory Visits

For the preparation of this report, a random sample of 30 cases were considered to identify whether Looked After Children statutory visits were conducted in a timely manner. It is very positive to note the visits had been undertaken within timescales in all 30 (100%), although some were yet to be documented. There is evidence of visits now being conducted face to face rather than virtually.

8. Key matters from this Report.

In the opinion of the Independent Reviewing Officers, these are the key matters arising from this report:

- (a) That Independent Reviewing Officers very much welcome the increase in the number of reports submitted in advance of LAC Reviews;
- (b) Efforts to ensure that every looked after child has an up-to-date assessment need to continue; and the quality of the assessments overseen by the Practice Lead
- (c) The Panel invite the Service Manager to present the IRO Development Plan to them.

Response to the above report by Children and Families Service:

The service welcomes the largely positive report prepared by the Safeguarding Unit and notes the improved/consistency of practice across a range of functions, inclusive of timely recording.

A draft policy regarding a 'no detriment' approach to supporting applications for special guardianship orders in respect of 'looked after' children has been produced and is due for consideration at the Children's Management team in September. As previously noted within the corporate parenting panel, the timescale for the review of the Part 6 template is December 2021.

It is important that each 'looked after' child has an up to date assessment of their needs. There will be a renewed focus upon this during the two quarters and the service anticipates there will be evidence of a significant improvement within that period. Details of when assessments should be updated has been inserted into the LAC procedures.

Life journey work is a critical piece of work for those children to be placed with adopters. There are two new targets set by the Welsh Government to improve the performance of authorities in terms of timeliness. The North Wales Adoption Service (NWAS) has appointed a 'Life Journey' social worker to assist across North Wales in terms of timeliness and quality. As noted within the report, the IROs will monitor and challenge performance.

Arrangements for contact for children in care was a particular challenge for the service during the two lock down periods of the pandemic. Understandably, the focus of the IROs was to challenge the service in terms of the best interests of the child and this is what transpired. The service also put the needs of the individual children at the heart of decision making; however, was often faced with competing tensions in the context of our duty of care to the health of parents, foster carers and staff. We are extremely proud of our staff and foster carers who rose to the challenge in such a demanding, challenging and complex environment. We did not get everything right, lessons were certainly learnt along the way, but staff worked diligently and stoically to achieve the best arrangements for children's contact with important people, balancing the needs of all in a period of utmost uncertainty. Notably, the Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) fully recognised how well the service responded to the pandemic generally during their recent 'assurance visit'.

The report notes the public law reform agenda (2021) and the service will implement the necessary changes to practice over the coming months. The service is content to provide a report to the Corporate Parenting Panel in December regarding the nature of these reforms and what it means for practice on Ynys Mon, if the panel deems this appropriate.

Consistency of social worker is something that children and young people repeatedly state is a major factor for them in their journey through care. The report clearly sets out the reasons for this; building relationships with trust at their core. The service will undoubtedly always face challenges as social workers and IROs move on, are sick for periods or who have periods of maternity leave. In that context, the service endeavours to keep transfers between social workers to a minimum.

References

Welsh Government, (2018). Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014, Part 6 Code of Practice (Looked After and Accommodated Children) [on-line]. Available from: <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-05/part-6-code-of-practice-looked-after-and-accommodated-children.pdf>. Date accessed: 23 January 2020.