

**TO: EXECUTIVE MEMBER CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND LEARNING
8 July 2014**

**INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER SERVICE: ANNUAL REPORT
Chief Officer Strategy Resources and Early Intervention**

1 PURPOSE OF DECISION

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to present the 8th Annual Report of the Independent Reviewing Officer Service to the Executive Member for Children, Young People and Learning

2 RECOMMENDATION

- 2.1 That the report set out in Annex 1 is received by the Executive Member, Children, Young People and Learning.**

3 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION

- 3.1. The IRO Service performs a key role in assuring the quality of the local authority's care planning for children who are looked after. The annual report supports the continuing development and review of the local strategy for children's services.
- 3.2. Guidance issued by the Department for Education [DFE] expects that an annual report should be provided to the Lead Member with Executive responsibility for Children's Services and for Corporate Parenting, with the aim of identifying good practice, and highlighting areas for further development / improvement. The Guidance states that the purpose of the report is to inform the development of local strategies for meeting the needs of children who are looked after by the Local Authority.
- 3.3 New guidance on care planning, placement and review of children who are looked after came into force on 1 April 2011, supported by a suite of documents; the new IRO Handbook was one of those documents.
- 3.4 There have been significant changes to the family justice system in relation to care, supervision and family proceedings including the introduction of a 26 week timescale for Care Proceedings once initiated. All these changes have had an impact on the plans and timescales for children, and the IRO Service. While it is hoped this will prevent delay for the child it is likely to have resource implications for all those involved in the care process including social work teams, IRO Service and placements with more work being required before proceedings are initiated.

4 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 4.1 None considered as production of such a report is recommended in Statutory Guidance.

5 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

- 5.1 The attached report sets out the work of the IRO Service over the period 1st April 2013- 31st March 2014. The report highlights good practice and identifies areas of potential concern and the measures that have been taken to address these. It highlights the close working relationship between the IRO Service and Children's Social Care; and that where necessary appropriate challenge has been undertaken to address issues that may impact on outcomes for looked after children and young people.
- 5.2 The Children and Young Persons Act 2008 and consequent IRO Handbook reinforces and strengthens the role of the IRO enabling more effective independent oversight and scrutiny of the child's case to ensure that the child is able to meaningfully participate in planning for their own care and that the care plan that the local authority prepares for them is based on a thorough assessment of the individual child's needs.
- 5.3. The report provides an account of the activity of the IRO Service and identifies a number of areas of good practice, and highlights areas for development within the service for looked after children. A few of these to note are:
- The number of children being looked after at 31 March 2014 has increased to 113 (at the end of March 2013 there were 103 LAC).
 - During the year a total of 327 looked after children reviews were completed, this is an increase of 18% on the previous year which saw 277 reviews taking place.
 - In March 2014 of the 327 reviews carried out 96% were within timescales, this is a slight decrease from 98% last year. This means that 4 out of 327 reviews were out of timescales and the report provides an explanation of why this has reduced slightly. In light of the volume of reviews and impact on resources 96% remains good performance.
 - Effective communication systems are in place for Children's Social Care when notifying the IRO of any potential changes or when a child is accommodated.
 - Child participation in reviews remains high with 99% of children over the age of four participating at the end of March 2014; the report identifies some imaginative ways of securing participation and a case study example shows the journey of one young person in participating in their review.
 - The Life Chances Team has made a positive contribution to developing multi agency support and monitoring for LAC, and the contribution of a range of partners has a significant impact on key areas of need such as health, education and emotional wellbeing.
 - The positive impact of the Child Participation Development Officer which supports the effective participation of children and young people looked after.
 - The ongoing commitment of all involved to focus on and improve the opportunities and outcomes for children and young people who are looked after.

- 5.4 In addition to the positive practice, the report also provides examples of challenge which are built into the IRO role, and how these have been resolved. The IRO Service has developed and implemented a clear dispute resolution process and that has been implemented during the year. This provides clear evidence of challenge and outcomes.
- 5.5 A further area for development this year has been in improving the performance and quality assurance activity. The IRO Service reports quarterly to Children's Social Care Management Team, and the IRO undertakes an audit following each review. The Team Manager has begun to undertake direct observations of the IRO in reviews and also implement peer review across the team. Another development this year is the Team Manager and the Head of Performance Management and Governance reporting six monthly to the Director Children, Young People and Learning.
- 5.6 The increase in numbers of children looked after and the consequent impact on capacity for the IRO Service has been recognised and positive action was taken, an additional half time IRO post has been appointed for a period of one year, if numbers continue to remain high this will need to be considered on a more permanent basis to ensure the IRO Service is able to continue to fulfil its statutory functions.

6 ADVICE RECEIVED FROM STATUTORY AND OTHER OFFICERS

Borough Solicitor

- 6.1 The Guidance is issued under Section 7 of the Local Authority Social Services Act 1970 which requires local authorities in their social services functions to act under the general guidance of the Secretary of State. The local authority is required to follow S7 guidance (known as statutory guidance) unless the council can articulate good public law reasons for not doing so. Or if following the guidance would create an absurdity.

Borough Treasurer

- 6.2 The Borough Treasurer is satisfied that reporting on the work of the Independent Reviewing Officer over the period of 1st April 2013 to 31st March 2014 presents no significant financial implications.

Any financial implications arising from changes to service delivery that may be required as set out in section 9 of the attached report will need to be evaluated and sufficient resources identified before being implemented.

Equalities Impact Assessment

- 6.3 The IRO Service is specifically for all children and young people who are looked after and as such includes a wide range of vulnerable children from variable backgrounds. Linked policies and procedures have been subject to EIA.

Strategic Risk Management Issues

- 6.4 No issues arise from this report.

7 CONSULTATION

Principal Groups to be consulted

None

Method of Consultation

Not applicable

Representations Received

Not applicable

Background Papers

Policy and procedure for the statutory review of children looked after: Bracknell Forest Borough Council	Revised 2011
Care Planning Placement and Case Review Regulations	2010
IRO Handbook – statutory guidance on the roles and Responsibilities of the IRO	2011

Contact for further information

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