

MIDDLESBROUGH COUNCIL

Corporate Parenting Board

<p>Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report 2010</p>
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Executive Member for Children, Families & Learning: Cllr Mike Carr

Director of Children, Families & Learning: Gill Rollings

3rd August 2010

PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1. The purpose of this report is to provide the Corporate Parenting Board with an update on the issues for Children Looked After within Middlesbrough.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

2. It is recommended that the Corporate Parenting Board advise the Executive to:
 - a) note the information relating to children looked after and the reviewing processes.
 - b) consider what further information they may require which can be incorporated in the next annual report.

IF THIS IS A KEY DECISION, WHICH KEY DECISION TEST APPLIES?

3. It is over the financial threshold (£75,000)
It has a significant impact on 2 or more wards
Non Key

DECISION IMPLEMENTATION DEADLINE

4. For the purposes of the scrutiny call in procedure this report is
Non-urgent
Urgent report

BACKGROUND & EXTERNAL CONSULTATION

5. Each year the Corporate Parenting Board receives information about the activity of Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) and Local Authorities on their functions in relation to case management and reviews for children who are Looked After.

6. As corporate parents, it is the duty of the local authority to ensure that effective care planning and review is underpinned by careful assessment for children looked after.

INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICERS

7. Independent Reviewing Officers were introduced on a statutory basis in 2004 to monitor the local authority's performance in respect of **reviews** for children who looked after. This role was modified in the Children Act 2008 to extend the responsibility of the IRO to monitor the performance by the local authority of their functions in relation to a child's **case**. The intention was to enable the IRO to have an effective independent oversight of the child's case and ensure that the child's interests are protected throughout the care planning process. (IRO Handbook Statutory Guidance 2010)
8. There are currently 4.6 Independent Reviewing Officers in Middlesbrough, responsible for the reviewing of all plans for children looked after and those who are subject to a child protection plan. In addition they carry out foster carer reviews and disruption meetings, (unplanned placement break down). Training staff and providing quality assurance in auditing and case work are key components to the role. To support the IRO's there is 1.6 admin support staff responsible for convening and recording the review details and distribution of the minutes from the review.
9. The staffing difficulties experienced in early 2008, following a Job Evaluation review whereby three out of the 4.6 staff resigned, have been resolved. In May 2009 the unit became fully staffed however, given the recent increase in children looked after; reviews being held within timescales are showing a significant decrease. The current case load for the IRO is above average for the region at 150 cases per IRO which has resulted in other aspects of the role not being fully carried out, such as training and development work.

Number of reviews held within timescale	Number of reviews not held within time scale	Reasons for not going ahead within timescale	Number of cases referred to CAF/CASS
69.9%	30.1%	Lack of coordination of diaries between SW and IRO Family not available Information about CLA not received in time for a review to be held	0

10. The local authority operate a *drift and delay* and a *challenge and support* process which has allowed for resolution to be reached and therefore no requirement for cases referred to CAF/CASS.

11. IROs provide a quality assurance role and carry out audits of case files prior to reviews taking place. Difficulties are being experienced in relation to the new electronic system that is in its initial stages of implementation. By December 2010 the ICS (integrated children's system) will be fully implemented and one process will be embedded. At the present time the authority are working with both paper and electronic records. Audit tools are being developed to accommodate the new changes.
12. Issues with Personal Education Plans have been identified and work is ongoing to address this via monthly performance clinics chaired by the Deputy Director, Safeguarding.
13. In 2010 the Independent Reviewing Officer Handbook, Statutory guidance for IRO's and Local Authorities on their functions in relation to case management and review for looked after children was disseminated. In addition to the changes highlighted in section 4 of this report the IRO handbook aims to extend the functions of the IRO to ensure the child is properly consulted on matters relating to his/her care and is given time to contribute to the content of the review. The guidance highlights the need for the IRO to see and speak to the child prior to the review taking place.
14. A further change of function is to give the IRO the flexibility to adjourn review meetings if they feel the process will be unproductive. This could be used if there is a lack of documentation or because the child has not been consulted about the process by the social worker.

ADVOCACY & SUPPORT

15. Middlesbrough Council has a contract with the National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS) and Spurgeons Independent Visitors Scheme. NYAS provides one to one support for children and young people and advocates on their behalf to ensure their rights and needs are met. The Independent Visitors Scheme provides a befriending service for children and young people with little or no contact with their birth family. Individual Independent Visitors may also advocate for the children and young people they visit, at their request.

RESOURCE ISSUES/RISKS TO SERVICE DELIVERY FOR LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN

16. During 2009, there was a reported increase in both children being made subject to a child protection plan and for children becoming looked after. This put increased pressure on the unit to meet the commitments in the reviewing processes. In order to deal with the lack of capacity the local authority agreed to agency staff who provided necessary cover to allow meetings for children to go ahead. These additional staff will be in place for a few more months and a review is underway to establish the necessary statutory functions of the IRO's in an attempt to streamline caseloads and workflow.

- 17 A report has been submitted to the corporate management team within the local authority to highlight the changes in the IRO handbook and the proposal for additional IRO's and support services to accommodate the changes. The report also highlights the need for a market supplement to be considered to align the salary of the IRO to a comparable rate with other authorities for retention and recruitment purposes.

SOCIAL WORK VISITS

18. Children looked after are subject to regular visits from social workers. The frequency of visits is regulated and agreed during supervision sessions with line managers. This provides a safeguard for children and young people as they have a regular opportunity to raise any issues of concern with their social worker. The increase in children looked after has put considerable strain on social workers to effectively carryout visits however IRO's report that children are continuing to be seen and systems have been out in place to allow for communications to take place via texting or email processes. A review of the authority's visiting frequency is being proposed.

GOOD PRACTICE

19. Over the last two years the local authority has introduced formal performance clinics which serve to monitor team performance against national indicators. These have been invaluable in maintaining standards for children in the looked after system in avoiding delays in planning for children. A recent scrutiny panel was established in January 2010 which, among other purposes, serves to provide an overview of cases in relation to kinship care, placement with parents regulations or approval for long term plans for children over 12yrs of age. Once approved these cases are then referred to the Deputy Director for consideration and authorisation

PLACEMENT STABILITY

20. Placement Stability is recognised as contributing to keeping children and young people safe and is a key element of the Performance Indicator framework. The table below sets out key indicators in relation to placement stability and our performance over the past 3 years.

INDICATOR	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10
NI 62 The percentage of CLA with three or more placements during the year.	10.7%	12.4%	10.2%
N1 63 The percentage of children continuously looked after for 2.5 years who were living in the same placement for 2 years.	69.5%	62.3%	56%

MOVING INTO INDEPENDENCE

21. Capacity issues within the IROs have meant that the reviewing of Pathway plans for young people leaving care does not take place at present. This issue is constant and discussions have been with the manager of the pathways team for this to happen when the current situation changes

INFORMATION SHARING & DATA MONITORING

- 22 The local authority has weekly information updates distributed to the case managers about activity of the cases active to social workers. This allows for effective monitoring in supervision and keeps social workers abreast of the national indicators to which they are working toward.

EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

23. All social care services are delivered within a framework of anti-discriminatory practice and there are no specific issues arising from the information presented within this report.

OPTION APPRAISAL/RISK ASSESSMENT

24. Not applicable to this report.

FINANCIAL, LEGAL AND WARD IMPLICATIONS

25. There are no financial or legal implications arising from this report.

RECOMMENDATION

26. It is recommended that the Corporate Parenting Board advise the Executive to note the information relating to children looked after and the reviewing processes
27. It is recommended that the Corporate Parenting Board consider further information they may require which can be incorporated in the next annual report.

REASONS

28. The Local Authority is responsible for ensuring that processes are put in place to provide the reviewing of effective care planning for children looked after. It is important that elected members are aware of and approve this aspect of Children, Families and Learning work in order that they can effectively fulfil their responsibilities as Corporate Parents.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

29. No background papers were used in the completion of this report.

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