

Independent Safeguarding and Reviewing Officers (ISRO) Annual Report 1st April 2017 to 31st March 2018.

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1. Introduction

An Annual Report of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Service for Children Looked After (CLA) is required in the guidance arising from the IRO Handbook 2011. This guidance brings together a set of statutory regulations for overseeing Care Plans and is part of the implementation of the Children and Young Persons Act 2008.

The post in North Somerset is ISRO (Independent, Safeguarding and Reviewing Officer.) as opposed to IRO as the IRO's also hold a safeguarding role.

This report is produced by the ISRO Team which sits within the Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Service, People and Communities, of North Somerset Council.

The report contains a summary of work completed by North Somerset ISROs between 1st April 2017 and 31st March 2018. It provides quantitative and qualitative evidence relating to the ISRO Team as required by statutory guidance as set out in the IRO Handbook and Care Planning Regulations (amended 2015).

The report focuses on the ISRO role and function; in particular the key trends with Children Looked After in North Somerset over the past year, and recent developments and challenges. It reflects the compliance, progress and contribution the ISRO team has made to the outcomes for Children Looked After in North Somerset and against the required statutory legislation.

The report highlights good practice and identifies areas for development for the forthcoming year.

It is important to note that ISROs chair both Child Looked After Review (CLAR) meetings and Child Protection Case Conferences (CPCC); however, this report will focus primarily on the CLAR aspect.

The report is provided for the scrutiny of Directorate Senior Leadership Team. The report contains performance information and narrative in respect of the statutory reviewing of Children Looked After by North Somerset. The report identifies good practice and seeks to highlight issues for further development.

ISRO reports are expected to include recommendations for the local authority in respect of the ISRO's suggestions on making improvements in services to children in care. ('IROs: taking up the challenge' Ofsted report - June 2017).

There have been some developments and many changes in the ISRO Team over this past year including staffing and the introduction of a Safeguarding and Reviewing Manager. These have all impacted on the work ISROs have undertaken. Specific details regarding the ISROs in relation to these changes are explored and discussed in the body of this report.

2. CORE FUNCTIONS, TASKS AND RESPONSIBILITIES.

The IRO Handbook lays down 'distinct responsibilities to Children Looked After,' and 'draws on models of best practise.'

The statutory duties of the IRO (section 25B (1) 1989 Act: -

- to monitor performance of the Local Authority of their functions in relation to the Child's case.
- participate in the review of the Child's case.
- ensure that wishes and feelings of the Child are given due consideration.

One of the primary tasks of the ISRO is to ensure the Care Plan for the Child fully reflects the Child's current needs and that the actions set out in the plan are consistent with the Local Authority's Legal Responsibilities towards the Child.

The responsibility of the ISRO has changed from the management of the CLA Review process to a wider overview of the case, including regular monitoring and follow-up between reviews, scrutiny and challenge with regard case management. The ISRO has a key role in relation to the improvement of care planning for Children Looked After with particular emphasis on challenging drift and delay.

The ISRO Team is responsible for the following functions: -

- convening and chairing of Child Protection Conferences.
- convening and chairing of reviews for Children Looked After.
- convening and chairing of reviews for children placed for adoption.
- convening and chairing of reviews for children placed in Kinship care placements.
- to challenge/dispute where the Care Plan and best interest needs of Children and Young People are not being met, plans are in drift and or delay.
- Audit of practice and cases.
- Chairing of SAR (Secure Accommodation Review) panels.
- DOFA, (Designated Officer for Allegations.) - allegations regarding adults that work with Children and Young People.

3. NORTH SOMERSET ISRO TEAM

The ISRO Team is part of the Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Service and sit alongside the Safeguarding Adults Team. The ISRO's report to the Safeguarding and Reviewing Manager. The Safeguarding and Reviewing Manager reports to the Service Leader for Safeguarding and Quality Assurance. The line management structure whilst within North Somerset People and Communities is separate from Children's case holding teams. This allows for independence within their role.

This year has presented the ISRO Team with some challenges.

There have been significant changes in staff due to personnel leaving the Local Authority to move on in their careers. The Team retained some ISROs who had been in post for some time. This provided some consistency and agency staff were employed to cover work within the team. This has been a time of change and the Team has reflected on the needs of the service, and how to meet the needs and responsibilities to our Children Looked After.

The ISROs hold a number of roles in North Somerset; they Chair Child Protection Conferences and scrutinise Safeguarding decision making and risk. The ISROs chair CLA reviews and challenge decision making where it is necessary. They sit within the Safeguarding and Reviewing Service and are responsible for auditing and ensuring best practice.

Following a period of change the ISRO Team has recruited new ISROs to the Team and the Team currently consists of:

- a new post of Safeguarding and Reviewing Manager (Operational Manager) full time, holding complex cases.
- 3 FTE posts ISRO's
- 3 18.5 posts ISRO's
- 18.5 DOFA (Designated Officer for Allegations.)

The IRO guidance makes it clear that an effective IRO service requires IROs who have the right skills and experience, working within a supportive context.

All ISROs in North Somerset are permanent members of staff. They are qualified social workers and some have management experience. They are all registered with the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC).

Responsibility for the activity and development of the team lies with the Service Leader for Safeguarding and Quality Assurance who reports directly to the Assistant Director for Adult Support and Safeguarding.

TRAINING.

The ISROs have attended bespoke training; this has included IRO Handbook roles and responsibilities, Challenge/dispute resolution, Signs of Safety, Writing plans for Children and Young People.

ISRO's have regular 1-1 supervision with their manager. Team meetings are held monthly, and peer support and observing each other's work is taking place.

4. ISRO CASELOADS.

The national guidance within the IRO Handbook (para.7.15) states that 'it is estimated that a caseload of 50-70 children for a full time equivalent IRO would represent good practice in the delivery of a quality service including the full range of functions set out in the handbook, the range should reflect the diversity and complexity of cases across different local authorities.' It is important to note that the

size of caseload alone does not indicate the overall workload for each individual ISRO as individual roles and responsibilities vary within the team.

At the beginning of this reporting period the ISROs were holding significantly more cases e.g. 100 - 120 and this had an impact on the standards the ISRO Team would wish to promote or achieve. During the start of 2018 and with a fully staffed team case load numbers have reduced and remain for a full time ISRO at approximately 63 which falls within the National Guidance.

The IRO guidance puts an emphasis on ensuring that the size of the case load enables IROs to have sufficient time to provide a quality service to each Child Looked After including, amongst a number of responsibilities, monitoring drift, undertaking follow up work after the review, consulting with the social worker following a significant change and meeting with the child before the review.

SUPPORT SERVICES.

Due to the way Business Support is now provided to the Team there has been a decline in the information and data collected and a decline in the accuracy of the information. Issues related to compliance, and recording related to Children Looked After is less available and complete. This has proved to be a challenge and the Team are considering ways to manage this so that it complies with the IRO regulations as indicated in the IRO Handbook.

TIMELINESS OF CLA REVIEWS.

511 Children Looked After reviews were held, 109 of these were out of time scales. The changes to Business Support have meant that data previously recorded regarding compliance are not recorded in the same way which has created a fluctuating picture. We no longer have a lead Business Support CLA administrator and this has led to a shortfall in the booking of reviews in timescale, meaning that compliance goes unchecked.

Total number of reviews during 2017/18	511
Total number of reviews not completed on time during 2017/18	109
% of reviews completed within timescales during 2017/18	78.7%

This performance has increased during 2017/2018 and there is a need for better data capture in this area.

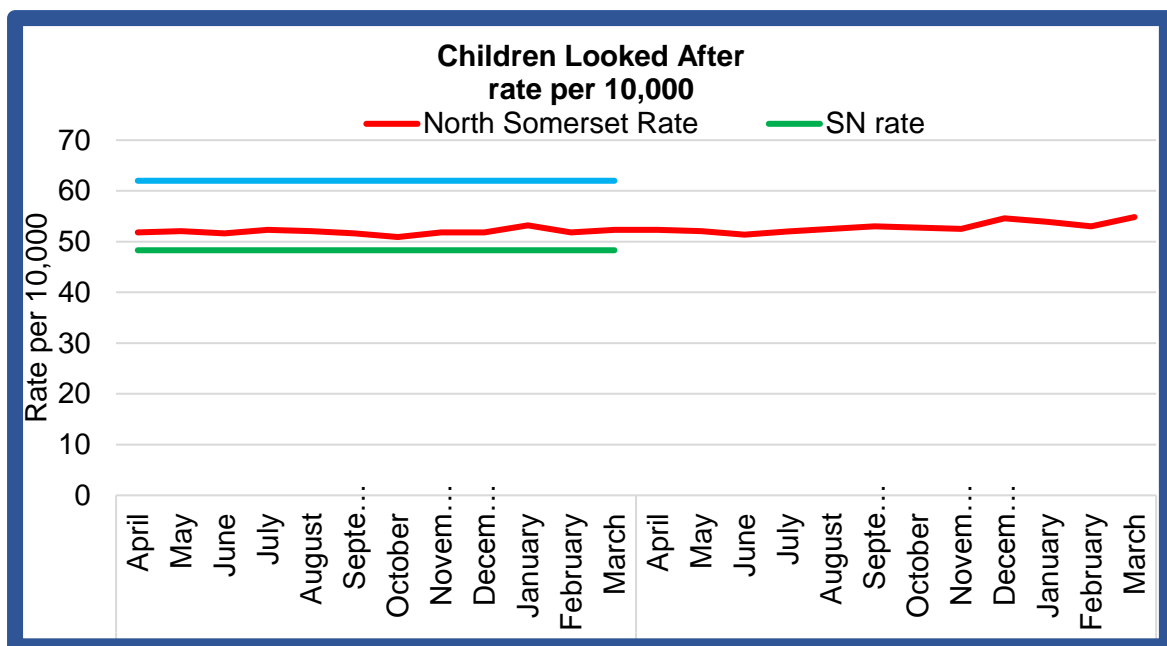
On many occasions the review would be 1 or 2 days outside of the statutory compliance. Examples of reasons for being out of timescale: -

- Changes of ISRO.
- Changes of Social Worker.
- Changes of placements.
- Error in the booking date.
- Excessive caseloads.

5. Activity

The number of Children Looked After by North Somerset:

The charts below provide the number of Children Looked After at the end of each month since April 2017 to the end of March 2018.



Monthly breakdown

2017/18	April	226	52.3		
	May	225	52.1		
	June	222	51.4		
	July	225	52.0		
	August	227	52.5		
	September	229	53.0		
	October	228	52.8		
	November	227	52.5		
	December	236	54.6		
	January	233	53.9		
	February	229	53.0		
	March	237	54.8		

Basic statistics Children Looked After at 31st March 2018

AGE AT 31 MARCH			
BOYS		GIRLS	
Under 1:	6	Under 1:	7
1 - 4:	14	1 - 4:	16
5 - 9:	14	5 - 9:	32
10 - 15:	53	10 - 15:	38
16 - 17:	30	16 - 17:	27
18 & over and placed in a community home:	0	18 & over and placed in a community home:	0
TOTAL BOYS:	117	TOTAL GIRLS:	120
TOTAL ALL CHILDREN LOOKED AFTER AT 31 MARCH:		237	

Care Orders:	Interim	39
	Full	128
Voluntary agreements under S.20 (single period of accommodation)		43
Freed for adoption		0
Placement Order		27

On remand, committed for trial, or detained	0
Emergency orders or police protection	0
TOTAL: 237	

CATEGORY OF NEED FOR CHILDREN LOOKED AFTER AT 31 MARCH 2018		
		SSDA 903 NEED CODE
Abuse or neglect	100	N1
Disability	9	N2
Parental illness or disability	7	N3
Family in acute stress	63	N4
Family dysfunction	46	N5
Socially unacceptable behaviour	1	N6
Low income	0	N7
Absent parenting	11	N8
TOTAL :		237
ETHNIC ORIGIN OF CHILDREN LOOKED AFTER AT 31 MARCH 2018		
White	206	
Mixed	15	
Asian or Asian British	3	
Black or Black British	7	
Other ethnic groups	6	
TOTAL :		237

6. PARTICIPATION.

The ISRO Team are committed to including Children and Young People in their meetings. All our Children Looked After are encouraged to participate in their reviews and are supported to know what their Care Plan is and understand what is happening in their lives.

260 Children/Young People attended their review meetings.

84 Children were under 4. ISROs visited to see the children in the environment where they were comfortable and engage where possible and observe behaviour and gain understanding about the child and their wellbeing.
 38 Children/Young People had an advocate to represent them.
 Only 18 Children/Young People did not attend or participate.

Number of CLA reviews and participation method for each month during 2017/18										
		Participation method								
Year	Month	PN0	PN1	PN2	PN3	PN4	PN5	PN6	PN7	Grand Total
2017/18	April	10	21		1	1	4	10	2	49
	May	6	21					4	2	33
	June	11	21		2		3	15	1	53
	July	8	16	4	1		9	1	3	42
	August	8	20	1			1	1	2	33
	September	4	20	2	2		3	7		38
	October	9	38		2		4	18	1	72
	November	4	16				3	4	2	29
	December	3	13	1			5	8		30
	January	7	32				2	4	1	46
	February	9	21	1			4	14	1	50
	March	5	21					7	3	36
		Grand Total	84	260	9	8	1	38	93	18

ISROs invite children to meet them individually just prior to a review as part of ensuring their views are appropriately expressed in the review or just after a review in order to check out their understanding of specific issues.

In a number of cases the review is undertaken as a series of consultations rather than a single event, and seeing the child alone is a natural part of that process.

There has been an increase in visits to Children Looked After between their review meetings or by seeing them prior to the review to gain their views.

The Team are in the process of re-designing the way CLA reviews are held to ensure that: -

- the meeting time, place and who is present is agreed with the Child/Young Person.
- is with, for and about the Child/Young Person.
- reflects their views and wishes.
- is clear about the Care Plan for the Child/Young Person.

The written minutes are changing and will take the form of a letter to the Child/Young Person. This is positive because the minutes will be about what the Child/Young Person has talked about in their meeting, it will be written with the Child/Young Person and will talk about what is working well and any issues in their lives that are most important and the plan about what needs to happen will be completed at the meeting and left with the Child/Young Person. This way of minute taking will also

show a quicker response to completing and sending out the minutes which will improve our compliance timescale in sending minutes out to meeting attendees.

This performance has increased during 2017/18 but there is a need for better data capture in this area.

Improvement is required in the recording of ISRO visits / other contact with children and young people who are Looked After. We are requesting that LCS is adapted to better evidence and record ISRO challenge, engagement with children and young people and for recording the "IRO footprint", i.e. the oversight and monitoring ISROs undertake of children's cases between reviews and better evidencing the child's voice.

Evidencing the ISRO "footprint" on the child's files is a challenge with much informal communication between ISRO, social worker and their team manager, not being recorded on the child's LCS file. Changes to the way case disputes are recorded will evidence the effective challenge provided by the ISRO service.

ADVOCACY.

The ISRO has access to advocates. Advocacy is promoted by the ISRO for the Child/Young Person where identified.

INTERPRETERS.

The ISRO has access to interpreters. An interpreter is available in all meetings that the ISRO has with a Child Young Person where they need this and where English is not their first language.

SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS.

Where the Child/Young Person has a disability or special need, the ISRO will discuss with those working closely with them how best to help them to participate and understand their meeting. The review can be based around the needs of the Child/Young Person. Sign language can be used and the ISRO will ensure that any help is available to enable participation.

7. Management oversight, Quality and Challenge/Dispute Resolution.

Local Authorities are 'corporate parents' for the Children and Young People they look after.

In April 2011 new government regulations and statutory guidance about Care Planning strengthened the role of the IRO.

This has meant that the responsibility of the ISRO to review process has widened to include monitoring of Care Plans and challenging drift and delay in implementation of Care Plans.

All Children Looked After are allocated a designated ISRO from the moment they enter the system with the key aim that the allocated ISRO will remain consistent, until the child is no longer looked after.

One of the key functions of the ISRO is to resolve problems arising out of the care planning process. ISROs within North Somerset, in the main, have positive working relationships with social workers and team managers of the children for whom they are responsible. Where problems are identified in relation to a child's case for example in relation to care planning, resources or poor practice, the ISRO will, in the first instance, seek to resolve the issue informally with the social worker or the social worker's manager. If the matter is not resolved in a timescale that is appropriate to the child's needs, the ISRO will escalate the matter accordingly following the local dispute resolution process.

The majority of case disputes (e.g. legal status, contact arrangements, living conditions, health or education support), are addressed at the level of social worker and manager. Few cases are escalated to senior managers.

The escalation process gives weight and strength to the role of the ISRO and emphasises the need for the ISRO to be accountable for the recommendations that are made at reviews. ISROs will refer to the process when actions or recommendations have not been followed up on behalf of a child/young person or where care plans have been delayed. Whilst in the main the majority are dealt with at social worker/team manager level, there are some that have been escalated to the Assistant Director of Children's Support and Safeguarding.

North Somerset ISRO Team have revised the dispute and challenge process. A spreadsheet has been designed to record Informal and Formal Challenge, timescales for response and impact for the Child Looked After and actions taken are recorded. This enables us to track challenges and ensure they are resolved in a timely manner and in the best interests of the child.

Training and support has been given to ISROs to promote this role and as a result there has been an increase in recorded challenge and the impact of this in the 2018 reporting year. Already the reporting for the first few months of the new reporting year has exceeded the reporting for the year 2017-18.

Staff change or absence for children is significant and includes:

- Interrupted Care planning.
- Progress of Care Plan actions.
- New workers making unilateral changes to Care Plans.
- Delivery of service through a professional relationship (some children state that they have had multiple social workers in short time periods).

Care planning and consultation – involving ISROs in proposed changes to care plans and keeping ISROs up to date with care planning developments is variable with a number of cases of failing to update the ISROs.

The quality of care planning and the level of ISRO liaison remains reliant on the individual social worker rather than being experienced as a managed system. This issue underlies a significant amount of dispute resolution at both an informal level and also at a formal level.

It is understood that these issues are now included into the agenda of the Practice Development Group and that care planning is also part of senior managers auditing.

Whilst ISROs continue to provide a hard copy review decisions/action plan for the carers and social worker after each review, the timescales for making the review notes available has been a challenge in this reporting year. The ISRO's would want to produce their minutes within 20 days as the IRO handbook indicates as a timescale. There has been some improvement on this but needs to improve further. Currently the plan completed at the review meeting is left with the young person, foster carer, social worker and other attendees where applicable. The proposed new minutes will be separated into a statutory section and a letter to the young person, this should improve the timeliness of completion of the review meeting minutes. This will require specific monitoring once we start using the new process to capture improvement.

Young people's engagement in the development of their care plan remains variable, and it appears to rely on the individual social worker rather than being a managed approach with clear expectations of staff. This area is a persistent area of concern and will require specific improvement work.

ISROs raise some concerns in respect of the quality of foster carers across IFA and 'in house' provision. The team would welcome a closer working relationship with the fostering team to identify opportunities to improve placement quality. As part of the review process the ISRO will expect a consultation form to be completed by the foster carers, (this happens for some IFA placements) and where necessary a discussion with the supervising social worker for the foster carers will be held. If the ISRO has any concerns or questions about the way the young person is being cared for the ISRO will follow up through discussion of the issues or raise a challenge/dispute. ISRO's are building on their relationships with social work teams and will be attending team meetings to promote our role as ISRO's.

We are in the process of making a number of significant changes to improve delivery of our service, and importantly to work with our Children Looked After, to increase their voice in the work we do, to promote their views and push for aspirational Care Plans which will meet their needs and promote good outcomes for their welfare in years to come.

LEGAL.

The ISRO's have access to legal advice outside and independent of North Somerset, this is being provided by Bristol Council. CAF/CASS is available to ISROs where complex cases or dispute/challenge needs independent discussion outside of the Local Authority.

8. ISRO Team Action Plan 01-04-18 – 31-03-19

What needs to happen, change or continue?	Who will help with changes and how will it be done?	When will this be done by?	What will we see happening to know the Plan is working
ISRO Caseloads need to remain within the National Recommendation of 50-70 cases	Safeguarding and Reviewing Manager	Throughout the year until March 2019	ISRO caseloads will be managed and an improvement in compliance and visits to children. ISROs will be able to see and or speak to children more often and be able to take up their concerns and issues quickly and consistently to improve outcomes for children and Young People.
Robust system for Dispute/Challenge	ISRO Team	November 2018	Dispute Resolution Protocol to be embedded and influence practice and service development and improvement. An increase in challenge regarding children looked after, care planning which shows positive impact for children looked after in North Somerset
Increase participation/co-operation of children looked after in their review processes	Safeguarding ISRO Team	September 2018	Changes to children looked after minutes, evidence of children attending, chairing and contributing to their meeting Children and Young People will be at the heart of all their meetings

			and know that they have been listened to. Their views will be clearly recorded. Communication between ISROs and the child/young person to become embedded into their daily practice with children's voices and experiences reflected throughout the ISRO representation to the local authority.
Improve timeliness and compliance of reviews	ISRO Team and Business Support	December 2018	Systems will be in place to ensure review meetings take place in a timely way and reduce cancellations All children and young people will know that they will have their meetings when agreed, the meetings will be planned and they will be central to the arrangements.
Review and develop Consultation Forms	Safeguarding ISRO Team	October 2018	To increase children, young people and family's involvement in their meetings so their views are recorded, listened to and acted upon.
Review of Business Support for children looked after	Safeguarding and Reviewing Manger Business Support	September 2018	Reporting and collation of information regarding the

			activity of the ISROs will improve. Children/young people will have minutes on time and the manager can make sure that children and young people are being seen regularly and that their Care Plans are reviewed so that plans can be changed to reflect any changes for the child/young person.
ISRO footprint of their involvement with children looked after will be evident	ISRO Team	January 2019	Quarterly audits by the Safeguarding and Reviewing Manager. Children and young people can see that their ISRO is advocating for them should they ever wish to view their files.
Collation and analysis of the issues raised in dispute and challenge	ISRO Manager	March 2019	Quarterly audits by the Safeguarding and Reviewing Manager. Children and young people will be heard and they will know that any challenge or dispute about their Care Plan will be raised in a formal way to promote change for them.
ISRO's will explore new and innovative ways of engaging children	ISRO Team	March 2019	There will be an increase in children's views being heard

looked after in their reviews			Children and young people will feel listened to and look forward to being part of the review meeting.
Monitoring children looked after care plans to ensure there are clear plans with timescales and outcomes	ISRO Team	March 2019	Children/young people are involved. Care Plans will be SMART and outcome focused. Planning/decision making is clear. Children and young people will have an up to date Care Plan that will be reviewed in a timely way and this will prevent drift and/or delay.

Ensure processes are in place to monitor policies and performance relating to both unaccompanied children and to trafficked children.

Accessible and meaningful data to include:

- The contribution that IROs make to the number of children looked after in relation to:
 - supporting work to return a child home in a planned and safe way,
 - helping to ensure that a child's looked after status is kept under review,
 - checking that children's plans have clear timescales for outcomes.
- Changing characteristics seen in the CLA population.
- Breakdown of participation figures for children and young people in their reviews.
- Young people's engagement in the development of their care plan.
- Specifics and characteristics in relation to the number of children and young people that returned from care to parents or relatives.