



Measures to Improve the Effectiveness of the IRO Service

Introduction

This paper identifies measures to enhance the effectiveness of the IRO service and improve outcomes for children in care. NAIRO will hold these as priorities as we continue our work thorough 2019.

There has been considerable discussion in the last two years about the value of the IRO role. Early proposals (which were subsequent dropped) in the Children and Social Work Act 2017 sought to water down and emasculate the role. Recommendations in the Narey/Owers “Fostering in England” report in February 2018, sought to do the same thing. The government did not accept these recommendations but urged that measures should be taken to improve IRO effectiveness. Their response to the fostering review included the following.

“We will work with organisations representing Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) and LAs to consider how the role of IROs can be put to best effect in the current system and under existing legislation. The variability of practice nationally is well known. There is potential for IROs to bring about significant practice improvements, alongside their role in ensuring that young people experience the best care from their fostering service. Where IROs are valued and listened to, they provide a legitimate and respected challenge function for individual children’s care plans and the wider service delivery. We want to iron out the inconsistencies, where these serve only to undermine the function of the IRO and to ensure that where practice differs, it is for good reason.”

NAIRO agrees that the quality of IRO services across the country is patchy. An analysis of Ofsted reports, in so far as they relate to the IRO service bears this out. The most frequent weakness that is referred to is the lack of effective challenge by the IRO to local authorities when it is needed. We believe that this problem often relates to a real or perceived lack of independence of the IRO service within the particular local authority, and several of the measures we suggest seek to address this difficulty.

This paper is an improvement plan for the IRO service. We have consulted widely within the IROs community to put together this plan. In particular we have

- consulted with IROs on our online forum and incorporated their ideas into our plan
- we used our annual conference on 18.10.18 for a consultation exercise. In particular we invited conference participants to write their ideas on post-it

notes which we gathered at the end of the conference. Appendix 1 is the verbatim transcript of those notes. We have sought to incorporate concerns and ideas expressed in this exercise into our plan.

We will work with all stakeholders in the sector (particularly NIROMP, the national managers group) to work up an action plan that will bring dramatic improvements to the service. We hope that this paper will provide a good platform for constructing a plan, which, when implemented may dramatically improve IROs effectiveness, for the benefit of children in care.

NAIRO November 2018

Measures to Enhance IRO Effectiveness

The measures we suggest might be taken at government, local authority, or IRO service level and the suggestions are grouped under these headings.

Government Level

1. Acknowledgment from Minister of importance of IRO role and government support for it
2. Review of legislative framework to consider strengthening role in relation to independence and authority. Such measures may include:
 - Review of the potential advantages and disadvantages of independent management arrangements for IROs outside local authorities
 - If management outside local authorities is not viable, identify measures to strengthen independence and authority within current arrangements.
3. Review of IRO handbook, considering in particular
 - Stronger statement about separate line management arrangements within the local authority
 - Stronger statement about children's rights
 - Stronger statement about support for IROs, particularly when in dispute with the local authority
 - Stronger statement about workloads
 - Stronger statement about training needs
 - Stronger statement about the organisational status of IROs
 - Encouragement of protocol in every LA between Lead member/Chief Exec/Director of Children's Services, setting out arrangements in the LA for ensuring independence
 - Clarification about the right of an IRO to apply to court in relation to a breach of a child's human rights (and, if this is not currently possible, changes to regulation / legislation to enable this)
 - Stronger statement about duty of IRO service to appraise LAs looked after children service as a whole, using annual report and other measures.
 - protection of core role from encroachment of other duties (e.g. child protection chair, LADO)
4. Ofsted to have a stronger focus on how the local authority makes effective use of its IRO service. IRO managers to refer to Ofsted if concerns are raised with DCS that are not addressed
5. Consideration to be given to extending IRO role to care leavers up to age of 25.

6. Strengthen legislation and regulations to give children in care unequivocal right to independent advocacy service which the IRO can invoke (this to be open access not gatekept)
7. Strengthen guidance on IRO involvement in care proceedings, placing a duty on IROs to make their views directly known about the LA's care plan to the court, and a duty on LAs to facilitate that information flow.
8. DfE to commission/provide a day's training on the role of the IRO for all SWs, managers senior managers and elected members. (This has been done before eg in relation to the Adoption and Children Act 2002)

Local Authority Level

1. Joint statement from Lead Member / Chief Executive / Director of Children's Services of importance and status of IRO role
2. Training/briefing to be provided across the LA on the role of the IRO for SWs, managers, senior managers and elected members.
3. Protocol to be agreed between lead member/Chief Exec/Director of Children's Services, setting out arrangements in the local authority for ensuring independence and efficacy of the IRO service
4. Ensuring location of IRO team in the organisational structure provides arrangements which are clearly separated from operational management arrangements
5. Regular meetings between the IRO service and the Lead Member /Chief Exec/ Director of Children's Services to review performance in relation to outcomes for looked after children
6. The annual IRO report should
 - appraise LAs looked after children service as a whole
 - report on the level of independence provided to IROs within the local authority and any barriers / threats to independence.
 - arrangements in place for IROs to access independent legal advice.
7. IRO manager to host meeting with LSCB Chair, Lead Member, DCS and others as appropriate to present annual report for discussion, feedback and agreed action. Ofsted to be copied minutes and actions from this meeting
8. Explicit acknowledgement of primacy of review process in care planning and that decisions from resource panels must defer to the reviewing process and the care planning regulations
9. Put in place measures for cases in care proceedings to ensure that IROs views on the LA care plan are made known directly to the court from the IRO.

10. Require managers in the IRO service to act as an IRO for at least one child at any time to encourage those managers to think independently and understand the IRO role fully as it operates currently

IRO/Team Level

1. Management arrangements that support IRO independence challenge and practice development.
2. IRO managers to act as an IRO for at least one child, at any time.
3. Regular meetings between the IRO service and the Lead Member /Chief Exec/ Director of Children's Services to review performance in relation to outcomes for looked after children
4. Liaison arrangements with LA legal department and CAFCASS to ensure that for cases in care proceedings, IROs views on the LA care plan are made known to the court directly from the IRO.
5. Recruitment practices support the appointment of IROs and IRO managers who are committed to childrens rights, IRO independence and challenge.
6. IRO & IRO manager training that sets out the importance of childrens rights, independence and challenge.
7. Adoption of a code of practice by every IRO team emphasising childrens rights and child centred practice (example is in the NAIRO toolkit)
8. IRO teams to have close links with Children in Care Councils (including a nominated link person)

Nairo conference October 18th 2018

Transcription of Post-it Notes

CHALLENGE

<p>Lack of resources/respect Caseloads Case management Dispute resolutions dismissed by higher management Lack of management support, lack of admin support, frequent change of social worker, high caseloads Too many other roles that takes the IRO away from core role (file audits foster care reviews child protection) Independence of role – change of structure caseloads/workloads Admin support Lack of respect Sharing info with family and friends Risk averse Understanding the role of the IRO within the organisation and respecting Use of language within reports and plans Children’s meeting rather than professionals meeting Response to challenge/disputes Resistance from some managers to challenge We do not always feel listened to respected or valued by management Lack of response to disputes and challenge Constant change of social worker, team managers and management structure Lack of continuity managing high caseloads care plans IT systems not compatible with role Lack of understanding of IRO role from front-line staff caseloads travelling Managers having lack of experience of IRO role Cessation of role at age of 18 Placement changes and resources Requirement (in reality) to support mentor and supervise social work practice How without the time this is an added value and demand of the role Limited admin support and systems support Supervision and accountability</p>	<p>Staff retention, availability of placements Lack of senior management consistency affected by staffing How to motivate as a force for change during austerity when more and more needs to be done by less Inconsistent understanding of IRO role Balancing role with additional tasks Being able to advocate children’s plan effectively when social work practice is not good enough Time spent dealing with practice/compliance issues Child in focus when up against challenge and dispute Engaging children in a culture of constant change Absence of direct communications with DCS and elected members Acceptance of IRO role /responsibility Lack of respect and understanding of the role (social work teams and wider partners) Selective respect for role and challenge. Lack of independence Add ons to role CP, audits etc Caseloads – CP vs LAC Lack of respect and being listened to staffing IRO footprint is it transparent? Not informed of significant events Prioritising direct work with children in care To be heard about collective themes rather than individual care plans Caseloads visits preparation leads to quality Sickness Lack of IRO training Social workers not aware of IRO handbook and responsibilities Placement stability Training needs Foster care Challenge the Army not the soldier Lack of status within the organisation IROs have too many roles (CP, reg 44, Lado)</p>
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EFFECTIVENESS

<p>Challenge needs to be heard by senior manager IRO links to social work teams constant changes in social workers Poor assessment lack of care planning Poor planning or permanency experience focus on child's voice robust dispute resolution process need to be supported to seek independent challenge how independent are IRO – management structure critical having relevant experience and qualifications to do job quality assurance – file review feedback to inform practice – review of care planning pathway in LA preventing drift, challenge care plan systems to reinforce voice of child being able to make child's voice heard and make a difference challenge all agencies to ensure no drift and delay close links to Children in Care Councils caseloads not giving IRO time to complete the role parity of managers, IRO role often downgraded need seniority over team progressing care plans preventing drift challenge of poor practice support of directors and senior managers tenacity of challenge potential for referring to Cafcass is an effective tool/weapon need the right culture eg management plus director level listening ear effective interpersonal relationships with professionals stable workforce participation of children and young people IRO involved in returning home with support project making change in the small way, consistent person in child's life when there is a high turnover of other staff children consulted IRO stay with children longer than social workers do</p>	<p>Reports to be distributed in timescales skill set of IRO and expertise new service manager he knows, understand and IRO role, leading service and raising profile service being respected autonomy/independent good dispute process effective dispute system process for resolution SLT recognition caseloads and supervision IRO are often the most consistent professional in the young people's lives to be effective turn up, be child-centred, child in the middle and child focused, effective participation of young people in reviews caseloads – these need to be at a level to enable IRO to complete all tasks focus of the child influence of procedures understanding of role from front-line staff and managed managers children under the same structure as IRO service in short child's needs are met support and ensure children are appropriately safeguarded challenge for practice and connection review of plans and challenge/child's best interests support good outcomes and make a difference we are that grit brackets (irritant) that produces pearl escalation processes and challenges are protecting plans/placements children open relationships with young people to get their views IRO to be contactable by young people visit as much as possible, texts et cetera social workers promote use of disputes to improve outcomes promote child's voice being heard and advocacy permanency to children challenge on behalf of children's rights and the insuring the child's wishes and feelings within the meeting empowering children young people to express and voice their views tackling practice of social workers e.g. lack of reports and raising with managers to enable change</p>
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WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE

<p>OFSTED to support IRO role Cafcass legal advice to offer consistent legal advice L.A.'s to have consistent legal advice to IRO IRO role to be taken seriously and listened to by directors Making the role of the IRO separate from being child protection conference manager Demonstrating how we value children looked after Respect of profession/recognition Attitude of senior managers Understanding of our role across all levels of social work Robust dispute resolution procedure Process to be in all L.A.'s and IRO to have training and confidence to follow the DRP Social work managers to understand the role of the IRO More independence How to challenge a culture LSCB? Greater requirement for DCS to meet directly and regularly with IRO team Recognition from senior management of role Reviews need to be valued Revise IRO handbook Explore being independent from LA Relaunch of IRO handbook (with training) Can we stop "the race to the lowest possible denominator" and make corporate parenting a national priority Equality for university access rather than postcode lottery Over professionalisation of children Structure of independence of role Legislative status to extend IRO to pathway plan and in particular with transitions to adult social care Culture in-house Modernisation of signs of safety Fewer changes of social worker More admin support lower caseloads to be able to fulfil the role</p>	<p>Ability to undertake visits between reviews Being able to challenge effectively More effective ways of capturing the child's voice Robust arrangements for legal advice to IRO IRO to have authority to make decisions regarding seeking legal advice Extend IRO role to 25 Annual report who owns and shares it. LA cultures – bullying, collusive, lipservice to child centred. Face-to-face review and scrutiny of foster carers, not paper review, needed annually. More consistent and streamlined challenge process The value of the role – culture, resources, training IRO managers to have IRO experience IRO role to be involved post 18 up to 25 to continue to review the pathway plans. Fewer changes of social workers/more stability Greater support from higher management. Greater inclusivity within L a/respect of role teamwork – greater cohesiveness/share practice Improved status/recognition throughout LAs. Dedicated space so people know where to find us plus we are not in a shared office with a hundred people (this actually should apply to social work teams we are not call centres. Greater understanding within SW teams of purpose of disputes - and defensiveness Recognition of weight given to feedback from IRO service re-service delivery. More supervision of IRO and accountability</p>
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