

Item No.	Classification: Open	Date: September 4 2008	Meeting Name: Corporate Parenting Committee
Report title:		The Work of the Independent Reviewing Officers Annual Report May 2008	
Ward(s) or groups affected:		All	
From:		Assistant Director of Specialist Children's Services and Safeguarding	

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. To note the work of the Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs), and the emerging themes affecting children in care in particular;
 - The strengthening of the IRO role
 - The improvement in participation of young people in their review
 - Improved timeliness of reviews
 - Ongoing concerns regarding long-term stability of placements
 - The gradual and consistent decline in the number of children in care
2. To approve the recommendation that the IROs should present an annual report on the work and performance of the service in delivering improved outcomes for children in care.
3. Provide feedback on the content and format on the first annual report and agree a template for future reports.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

4. The appointment of an independent reviewing officer (IRO) is a legal requirement under Section 118 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002. The government issued the Review of Children's Cases (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2004 along with statutory guidance in September 2004.
5. The regulations require all local authorities to appoint an IRO to participate in the statutory meetings to review the care plan of each looked-after child. The IRO usually chairs the meeting. The IRO is also responsible for monitoring the performance of the local authority's functions in respect of each review. If appropriate, IROs can refer a child's case to the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS), which in exceptional circumstances, can return the case to court. IROs are ideally placed to assess the quality and effectiveness of local authority planning and support for children.
6. The 2004 regulations impose a duty on the IRO to ensure that:
 - Children's views are understood and taken into account
 - Persons responsible for implementing review recommendations are identified
 - Any failure to review cases in accordance with the regulations or to make arrangements to implement any aspect of the care plan is brought to the attention of the accountable service managers.

KEY ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

7. The IRO service plays a key role in ensuring that care plans for children in care have objective oversight, and that the quality of planning is timely and meets the needs of the child.
8. The service is in a unique position to judge the quality of social work practice and draw out any emerging themes which need to be addressed. It has a key role to play in improving performance and in particular, focus on long-term stability of children in care, which was an area for development highlighted in the Joint Area Review.
9. The report covers the period 2004-2008, as there have not been any annual reports produced since the service was established. It is anticipated that in subsequent years, an annual report will be produced which will draw out some of the emerging themes in relation to children in care and focus on how outcomes have been improved.
10. Some of the emerging issues include:
 - a. The strengthening of the IRO role in the Children and Young Person's Bill 2007, which will include the new requirement for the IRO to monitor how the local authority performs all its functions in relation to a child's case and not just the review. The Secretary of State will also have new powers to make provision for IRO services to be delivered by an independent national body if thought necessary.
 - b. The improvement in participation of young people in their review meetings has ensured that the children looked after service has become increasingly responsive to needs, and care plans are more reflective of the children and young people's wishes.
 - c. Timeliness of reviews has also improved significantly from 88% in 2005/06 to 96% in 2008. IRO consent is needed before a review is cancelled, and this can only be given in exceptional circumstances.
 - d. Long-term stability of placements remains a concern, and has a new performance focus following the JAR. This indicator is adversely affected by adoption rates, and given Southwark's good performance in 2007/08, it is not surprising that the indicator has shown a slight decline. However, more in depth analysis of the cohort is being undertaken to better understand the factors affecting stability.
 - e. The gradual and consistent decline in the number of children in care, particularly the reduction in unaccompanied asylum seekers. This area is monitored closely, and it is anticipated that there will be further reductions until the end of the year.

Policy implications

11. The IRO service has a pivotal role to play in delivering the aspirations in the Children and Young People's Review to continue to improve outcomes for children in care. The report describes how the service contributes to our priorities which include:
 - Reducing the number of children in care;
 - Improving educational attainment; and
 - Improving long-term stability.

Community Impact Statement

12. Southwark's care population is ethnically diverse, although there is a slight over-representation of children from black and minority ethnic groups. The IRO service is instrumental in ensuring that all children receive a well planned service which effectively addresses their needs. IROs are independent of the main service for children in care and can provide objective oversight of planning and decision making.

SUPPLEMENTARY ADVICE FROM OTHER OFFICERS

Director of Legal of Democratic Services

13. Not applicable.

Finance Director

14. Not applicable.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Background Papers	Held At	Contact
Children and Young People's Review.	http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/spending_review/spend_csr07/reviews/cyp_review/cyreview_index.cfm	Rory Patterson 020 7525 3846

APPENDICES

No.	Title
Appendix 1	Annual Report May 2008 Work of the Independent Reviewing Officers

AUDIT TRAIL

Lead Officer	Rory Patterson Assistant Director of Children's Specialist Services and Safeguarding	
Report Author	Rory Patterson Assistant Director of Children's Specialist Services and Safeguarding	
Version	Final Draft	
Dated	August 22 2008	
Key Decision?	No	
CONSULTATION WITH OTHER OFFICERS / DIRECTORATES / EXECUTIVE MEMBER		
Officer Title	Comments Sought	Comments included
Director of Legal and Democratic Services	Yes	No
Director of Finance	Yes	No

Executive Member	Yes	No
Date final report sent to Constitutional/Community Council/Scrutiny Team		August 22 2008