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**Meeting of Executive Members and Children's  
Services Advisory Panel**

16 October 2006

Report of the Assistant Director, Children and Families

**Independent Reviewing Service, Children & Families: Annual Report**

**Summary**

1. The Adoption and Children Act 2002 introduced new regulations and guidance in respect of the Independent Reviewing service, including the requirement to provide an annual report to the lead member with executive responsibility for children's services and corporate parenting. The Guidance was implemented in York in February 2005.
2. The purpose of this report is to inform the Executive Member and Advisory Panel about key aspects of the service and to provide a progress report following the local implementation of the new regulations and guidance.

**Background**

3. The Independent Reviewing Service is well established locally and is recognised as providing a good quality reviewing service to children, families and professional colleagues. The core elements of the service are to review statutory plans for looked after children and to establish and review multi agency child protection plans on behalf of the City of York Child Safeguarding Board. The service is delivered by a team of Independent Reviewing Officers who chair all the child care reviews and child protection conferences in the City, and by a team of specialist Administrative Coordinators whose function is to ensure that the child care review and child protection systems run effectively and smoothly for all parties.
4. Whilst the Children Act guidance requires that the Executive Member is appraised annually about the statutory review arrangements for looked after children, the opportunity has been taken here to give an update about the wider service provided by the section.

**Analysis**

**York's Independent Reviewing Service**

5. City of York's reviewing section comprises three full time equivalent Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) and seven full time equivalent Administrative Coordinators. All staff are employed by the local authority. The service is located within the Children and Families Quality Assurance section, the Service

Manager, Quality Assurance, reporting directly to the Assistant Director. This arrangement is fully consistent with national guidance for the location organisationally of the service. The arrangement achieves the necessary independence of IROs from the social work teams which formulate and implement children's plans and from resource and other service providers. It also maintains an integrated and collaborative approach to care and protection planning, essential features of a system that promotes the best outcomes for children.

6. Statutory child care reviews and child protection conferences take place within a much broader, multi agency care and protection planning context. In 2004, in anticipation of the new IRO Guidance, preparatory work was undertaken within the QA section to identify the key processes, systems, roles and responsibilities that combine to create an effective and quality assured planning and review system. Details of this are provided at Annex 1 for information.

### **Statutory reviews for looked after children**

7. When a child becomes looked after, the social work team must produce a care plan in respect of the child. It is the responsibility of the IRO to review this plan, checking quality and progress and ensuring that all parties are consulted in the process. The IRO must take appropriate action if problems are identified in implementing the plan or if poor practice is identified. Reviews have a statutory basis and must take place within 28 days of the child first becoming looked after, three months from this date and thereafter not more than six monthly. Additional reviews can be held as appropriate. Disabled children who receive a series of short breaks (respite care) must also have care plans which must be reviewed regularly.
8. At the time of writing this report, 154 children were being looked after by City of York and 73 disabled children were receiving a series of short breaks. During the past three years, 458 children (inc disabled children) and young people have been looked after for varying periods of time. Consequently;
9. 585 statutory child care reviews have been chaired, recorded and administered annually by the section (average over the past three years). The performance target definition in relation to review timescales has recently changed and full year figures are not yet available. Performance under the previous definition was consistently high, reaching 95%.
10. A key function of the Independent Reviewing Officer is to ensure that each child has a care plan and that the plan meets the identified needs of the child. It is the responsibility of the Local Authority to decide *how* any recommendations from the review of the plan will be implemented but the IRO must check that the Local Authority has taken the necessary steps to ensure that actions and changes are implemented without undue delay. Where there are problems with implementing individual care plans, the IRO is expected to seek satisfactory resolution with social work colleagues and managers, these steps being documented in internal procedures. A new system has been introduced with the specific purpose of enabling IROs to highlight and progress priority concerns in relation to the

implementation of the care plan. Called the 'specific issue system', this system has been used sparingly to achieve maximum impact. Where an issue of concern has been identified by the IRO (for example where there has already been delay or where there is some doubt about the quality of child care practice) this is reported immediately to the worker and line managers with a clear request for action according to a specific timescale. At the time of producing this report, 15 'specific issues' have been highlighted by the IROs. Areas identified for action were as follows:

- Progressing key aspects of assessment / planning (4)
- Progressing Life Story Work (3)
- Clarifying educational provision (2)
- Clarifying social work arrangements (2)
- Progressing a health issue (1)
- Other (3)

Experience to date suggests that senior managers take 'specific issues' seriously but that it is easier to resolve matters relating to timescales rather than practice quality. This system continues to evolve and IROs are looking at ways in which they can become more consistent and proactive in ensuring that specific issues are resolved.

11. In addition to monitoring the progress of individual plans, improved general performance monitoring has been introduced. IROs and their manager meet with operational managers on a quarterly basis to discuss common areas of practice and to provide statistical data, eg in relation to care plan completion. Care plan completion rates have become a key performance target for Children and Families and progress is monitored up to the level of the Director's Departmental Management Team. Recently introduced Care Plan monitoring shows that 76.5% of all care plans reviewed during the first 6 months of 2006 were completed (includes some plans where signatures omitted).
12. The Children Act 2002 regulations gave IROs a new power. Where a child's human rights are considered to be in breach and as a last resort, IROs can refer a case outside of the Local Authority to the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS) to bring legal proceedings in order to achieve a resolution. CAFCASS is independent of the Local Authority and looks after the interests of children involved in family proceedings. It works with children and their families, and then advises the courts on what it considers to be in the children's best interests. No case has yet been referred to CAFCASS from York or any other Local Authority. There is significant interest in this new power within the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and regional feedback suggests that this option for IROs has in some cases prompted resolution within the local authority.
13. IROs must ensure that children are consulted and that children's views are understood and taken into account within the review process. They must check that the social worker has given the child the opportunity to present their views (prior to meeting). Child care reviews have traditionally been conducted on the basis of meetings: it has generally been considered expedient to gather together

the child, family and all those involved in providing services to discuss, progress, endorse or change the plan. Much research has been undertaken in this area, both locally and nationally, concluding that this model is not ideal for most children who sometimes find the process bureaucratic, overwhelming and boring. In York, work continues to improve the experience of children who contribute to their reviews through the creation of more 'user friendly' contribution papers, viewing the review as a process, actively planning this around the wishes and feelings of the child and helping and supporting children to take more control over their reviews, for example chairing a meeting. The IROs and the children's disability social work team continue to progress initiatives aimed at promoting and ensuring the meaningful participation of disabled children and children who have communication difficulties. This work has included the introduction of specific contribution documents for children, parents and carers, and a more 'fluid' approach to consulting children is being piloted along with colleagues from The Glen respite centre. In 2005/6 86.11% of all children and young people participated in their reviews (PAF Indicator C63). This figure is typical of local performance over the past three years and compares well with the national figure of 83.35% (2004/05 – latest available national figures).

### **Child Protection Planning and Reviewing**

14. Multi agency practice relating to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children is governed by legislation, statutory guidance and local procedures. Where it is suspected or known that children are suffering, or are at risk of suffering significant harm, specific actions must be undertaken to protect children, including a full investigation, assessment of the child's needs, agreeing strategy and the convening of an initial child protection conference. The purpose of the child protection conference is to enable those professionals involved with the child and family, and the family themselves, to assess all the relevant information, and to plan how best to safeguard and protect the welfare of the child. An initial child protection conference must be held within fifteen working days from the convening of a multi agency strategy meeting. The first review conference must take place within three months of the initial conference, and reviews must thereafter be held not more than 6 monthly for the duration of registration.
15. The Admin Coordinators liaise closely with social work teams to ensure that the right people are invited to the conference and that invitations and information are distributed appropriately. The Independent Reviewing Officer is responsible for meeting the child and family in advance of the meeting to explain the process and to optimise and manage parental contributions to the debate. They must ensure that those present (and absent) are able to contribute to the discussion and decision making and ensure that the conference takes the decisions required of it in an informed and systematic way. Where the conference takes a decision that a child's name should be placed on the Child Protection Register, the IRO must facilitate the production of a good quality, multi agency child protection plan. This plan and its implementation will then be reviewed at subsequent review child protection conferences. Full minutes of each conference are taken by Admin Coordinators who then arrange for these to be sent to all parties.

16. At the time of writing this report, 54 children's names were placed on York's Child Protection Register. During the past three years, 235 children and young people became subject to child protection registration, many of whom were subsequently de-registered. Consequently;
- 170 child protection conferences have been chaired, minuted and administrated annually by the section (average over the past three years);
  - City of York performance in relation to holding child protection review conferences within timescale is consistently above the national average, with 2005/06 performance reported at 100% (APA 2005/06).
17. In service development terms, a number of key challenges face the section:
- New guidance affecting the roles and responsibilities of IROs and how conferences are conducted is due to come into effect in October 2006. Work to understand the local implications of implementing the new Working Together Guidance will be coordinated by York's Children's Safeguarding Board and it is anticipated that the Reviewing Team will contribute to this. An update will be offered in the next annual report to Executive Member.
  - Children's participation in the child protection process continues to be a topic for debate. The new guidance suggests that children should be invited to attend their child protection conference, with a supporter or advocate, and subject to their age and understanding. It has not been the practice in York to invite children to attend conferences and this occurs very rarely. A member of the IRO team is currently looking at best practice and the experience of other local authorities with a view to developing consultation tools for this purpose. It is anticipated that this work will also inform the development of local policy in this area.

### **Complaints**

18. York's Independent Reviewing Officers have historically played a key role in the formal investigation of Stage 2 children's complaints, the independence of IROS from operational managers and service providers affording a degree of independent scrutiny within the complaints process. The new Children Act Guidance has given IROs specific additional responsibilities in relation to complaints made by looked after children. IROs are now expected to become involved in serious complaints concerning a child's care plan and should work closely with the Complaints Manager and advocates to resolve problems.

### **Other improvement priorities for the service**

19. Transitional planning: Independent Reviewing Officers remain involved with the same children from ages 0 -18 and are beginning to chair transitional planning meetings when cases move from the 0-10 social work teams to the 11+ social work teams. This is a new initiative aimed at improving consistency and ensuring that whilst planning takes account of resource availability, plans ultimately evolve in accordance with the best interests of the child.

20. Stability of placements: Placement stability is a key performance issue for the local authority. A new system has been recently introduced in Children and Families whereby all care plans advocating long term fostering for looked after children up to the age of 11 years are formally presented to an internal panel of senior managers for debate and approval. IROs would encourage the extension of this system to include children up to 14yrs to scrutinise plans and clarify the status of placements.
21. Outcome focused planning: The team continues to play a lead role in the development and implementation of the Integrated Children's System (ICS). IROs and the Senior Admin Coordinator are developing, testing and piloting new systems and protocols across the child protection and looked after services. It is anticipated that IROs will play a key role in leading the introduction of outcome focused planning, through direction in meetings and through offering ongoing support and training. IROs continue to monitor the completion of care plans, but aim to focus next on the completion of core assessments which continue to be a challenge for the authority.
22. To summarise, the new Adoption and Children Act 2002 guidance has provided a much clearer framework within which the service has been, and continues to be developed. Job plans and grades have been reviewed and amended across the section to reflect the additional powers and responsibilities of the service. A key and purposeful tension exists in relation to the role of the IRO. They must remain independent from operational colleagues yet must work cooperatively with colleagues to achieve the best outcomes for children. Achieving enhanced status and changing perceptions of the IRO role within Children and Families remains a challenge, but experience indicates that the Assistant Director and senior managers are lending active support to the team. More regular dialogue with managers enables the team to progress this agenda and to focus attention on improving key aspects of planning and reviewing activity.

## **Consultation**

23. In compiling this report, the contents have been shared with all members of the Reviewing service and with members of the Children and Families Senior Management Team

## **Options**

24. The Adoption and Children Act 2002 regulations and guidance included the requirement to provide an annual report to the lead member with executive responsibility for children's services and corporate parenting. This report fulfils that requirement. Rather than proposing options for action, the report provides information for comment.

## **Corporate Priorities**

25. The improvement plans noted in this report contribute to the objectives of the Directorate Children's Plan and the Children and Families' Services Plan.

## Implications

26. There are no financial, HR, IT, Property or Crime and Disorder implications of this report. The work of the team enables the authority to fulfil statutory duties and contributes to our equalities agenda through the positive engagement of hard to reach young people

## Risk Management

27. No known risks.

## Recommendations

28. The Executive Member is recommended to note the contents of this report and to receive further reports on this service on an annual basis.

## Contact Details

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Report Approved  Date 26 September 2006

Patrick Scott, Director of Learning, Culture and  
Children's Services

Report Approved  Date 26 September 2006

**Specialist Implications Officer(s)** - None

**Wards Affected:** *List wards or tick box to indicate all*

All

For further information please contact the author of the report

### Background Papers:

- Report to the Personnel Committee, 15 November 2004: **Implementing National Reviewing Officer Guidance – Grading of Independent Reviewing Officers**
- Report to the Personnel Committee, 5 July 2005: **Generic Job Plans For Administrative Coordinators In Children's Services**
- **Independent Reviewing Officers Guidance:** Adoption & Children Act 2002, DfES
- **Working Together to Safeguard Children:** A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of Children. HM Government, 2006

### Annex 1:

**Developing Good Practice – A Quality Assurance Framework**