

Appendix 2c: Other Audits and Grant Claims

Independent Reviewing Officers

Objective

To assess the effectiveness of Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO's) in ensuring children's needs are met and their outcomes improved through the support and services that they receive, enabling them to reach their potential.

Scope

The key risks audited are set out in the Action Plan attached at Appendix 1, with details of any action required to mitigate them further.

Recommendations are only made where they are necessary to mitigate fully the risks audited. Therefore, they should be implemented by the dates agreed unless there is a good operational reason why this is not practical.

Audit Committee Summary

The Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) audit was in progress when Ofsted announced their inspection of Children's Services in July 2019. A decision was made to pause the audit during this period.

The Ofsted report highlighted some opportunities for improvement within the IRO service and so, in consultation with the Head of Children's Transformation, a decision was made not to continue with the audit while an improvement plan was put in place.

The findings from the audit up to this point were shared with the service and the action plan developed which includes areas where there were opportunities to strengthen arrangements. This includes:

- developing a Southend Borough Council specific IRO handbook, detailing the;
 - aims, objectives, required outcomes and / or impact of the IRO service
 - role, responsibilities, accountabilities and expectations of IROs
- re-introducing practice observations and developing a case-file audit programme to give assurance over the quality and impact of IRO practice, help identify good practice and aid ongoing improvement / development of the service
- reviewing and extending data sets within Liquid Logic (LCS) to enable accurate monitoring of performance of the IRO service, including the timeliness of IRO actions
- developing a formal process for capturing and recording decisions made at Child Protection and Looked After Children meetings that require increased monitoring by the IRO, to enable them to actively monitor between meetings, in order to minimise drift and delay for children and young people
- refining the existing dispute resolution process to ensure:
 - timeframes and responsibility at each stage are clear, removing the risk of drift, delay or inaction

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- managers have performance information to enable them to action the issues in dispute
- workflow processes for formal and informal cases within LCS are sound, allow for robust monitoring, reporting and escalation on outstanding concerns
- developing a rolling training programme that supports IRO's and Children's Services staff to deliver their legislative duties and the wider requirements of them within Children's Services.

Senior management will monitor and sign off the agreed action plan as part of the Children's Services performance management process, via the Performance Board.

In House Foster Carers

Objective

To assess the effectiveness of the 'Fostering Team Action Plan' in ensuring appropriate processes are developed to allow for statutory requirements to be met and good practice followed, supporting safe and high quality placements for children.

Summary

The Head of Service had carried out a review of the Fostering service in February 2019, supported by Essex County Council through Partners in Practice, and detailed areas for improvement in a 'Fostering Diagnostic and Review of Fostering Services' report. Using the report as a starting position for developing required actions, management drafted an In House Foster Carers Action Plan, to use as a key tool for driving positive change to the service.

At the time of starting the audit, the action plan was being reviewed and refreshed. Following discussion with management, it was decided that there was greater value to be added by Internal Audit, through assisting the service in the development of the revised action plan, in an advice and support capacity.

From December 2019 through to May 2020, Internal Audit met with management on a number of occasions to assist in developing the:

- layout of the plan, to help ensure information within it is clear and concise, easy to follow and understand
- content of the plan, helping to make actions SMART and outcome focused.

The plan was subsequently shared with the Southend Children's Services Early Help and Social Care Performance Board in May 2020, giving experienced Social Care managers the opportunity to:

- feedback on and agree the identified actions, success measures and desired outcomes
- identify areas where other social care teams may be able to support delivery of the action plan
- consider any overlaps or dependencies with other improvement plans within the service area.

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Moving forward, Internal Audit will continue to provide advice and support to management as they set out the governance arrangements for the action plan, which will include developing:

- appropriate arrangements to monitor progress against delivery of the actions within the plan, and identify whether these are achieving the desired outcomes
- simple reporting arrangements to allow for regular progress reports on progress in achieving outcomes to key stakeholders.