

Report summary

Independent reviewing officers: taking up the challenge?

The core purpose of the independent reviewing officer (IRO) role is to ensure that the care plan for the child fully reflects the child's needs and to ensure that each child's wishes and feelings are given full and due consideration. The appointment by local authorities of an IRO is a legal requirement. This report evaluates the effectiveness of IROs in discharging their responsibilities towards looked after children.

The Children and Young Person's Act 2008, followed by revised care planning regulations and guidance which came into force in April 2011, strengthened the role of the IRO, who is not only responsible for chairing statutory reviews but also for monitoring cases on an ongoing basis. Concerns had arisen over time that IROs did not sufficiently challenge local authority decisions when practice was poor and not in children's best interests.

The IRO also has a duty to monitor the local authority's overall performance as a corporate parent and to bring any areas of poor practice in the care and planning for looked after children to the attention of senior managers.

The pace of progress in IROs taking on the full scope of their enhanced responsibilities was too slow in most authorities visited by inspectors. IRO oversight of care plans was not consistently robust. IROs did not sufficiently challenge delays in the making of permanent plans for children's futures. The views of children were not always taken into full account. The IRO role in monitoring and challenging local authorities' overall performance as corporate parents was underdeveloped.

Inspectors did see some sensitive work by IROs to engage with children. IROs generally met with children prior to review meetings when possible, although excessive workloads in several local authorities affected their capacity to meet with children more often between reviews. When IROs were able to spend more time with children, their wishes and feelings were more likely to be fully understood and taken into account in reviews and in care planning.

In most local authorities visited, caseloads for IROs were higher than recommended in statutory guidance. This seriously reduced their capacity to undertake their roles effectively. Improvement is needed to ensure that IROs are sufficiently supported and challenged by leaders to undertake their role in driving effective improvement in services for looked after children.

Key findings

- The pace of progress in IROs taking on the full scope of their enhanced responsibilities has been too slow in most local authorities.
- The effectiveness of IRO oversight of individual looked after children's care plans was not consistently good enough.
- Excessive workloads for IROs in most authorities visited had an adverse impact on their ability to carry out their role effectively, particularly in ensuring that children's voices influence planning for their future care.
- In nearly all authorities, review recommendations and the subsequent monitoring of progress by IROs were not consistently rigorous, leading to poor planning for children's futures and unnecessary delay in some children's cases.
- Children and young people were not always properly consulted on the venues for reviews and about which adults they would like to attend.
- Social workers and IROs communicated regularly with each other between reviews, although the purpose and impact of this was not always evident.
- The quality of IRO annual reports, where they existed, was not consistently good enough. Nearly all reports that were produced were not accessible to children, young people, carers and families, or to the wider public.
- IROs in most areas visited had not forged strong links with the corporate parenting board or the Children in Care Council. They were not sufficiently integrated into senior leadership discussions or strategic reviews of the progress and experiences of looked after children and young people.
- Formal dispute resolution processes were in place, but were not always well understood or used when required.
- Generally, the involvement of IROs in cases during care proceedings was underdeveloped, although there were signs of improving liaison with the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) in several authorities.
- Oversight of IROs' work by their line managers was not sufficiently rigorous in most local authorities visited.
- The independent challenge that can be provided by IROs was encouraged and welcomed by senior managers as a lever for improvement.

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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M2 7LA

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.ofsted.gov.uk

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