

# Independent reviewing officers: taking up the challenge?

## Summary report for children and young people

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Ofsted inspects services for children such as schools, children's homes and foster services for adoption and fostering.

Ofsted inspectors recently looked at how well independent reviewing officers (IROs) carried out their responsibilities on behalf of looked after children and care leavers in 10 local authorities. This summary explains what the inspectors found and what Ofsted says needs to be improved.

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## Introduction

The main task for independent reviewing officers (IROs) is to make sure that the right plans for every looked after child are in place and that everyone who is responsible for their care is doing the best for them and thinking about the help they need for their futures. The law says that local authorities have to appoint an IRO for each child and young person who is looked after.

Since 2011 IROs have had extra legal duties to help them challenge councils more, in order to make sure looked after children receive the best help, care and support.

IROs chair review meetings for looked after children and they should also:

- keep a close eye on how plans for children's futures are progressing between review meetings
- speak to children and meet with them before reviews to make sure they take into account their wishes and feelings
- check how well the council and other services as a whole are doing as 'corporate parents' of young people who are looked after. (Corporate parents should look after young people in care and make sure they get the things they need, in the same way they would for their own children.)

Ofsted inspects services for children, including schools, children's homes and services for adoption and fostering, and has published a report called *Independent reviewing officers: taking up the challenge?* Ofsted inspectors looked into how well independent reviewing officers (IROs) carried out their responsibilities on behalf of looked after children and care leavers in 10 local authorities. Inspectors examined 111 cases. They also listened to the views of children and young people, carers, and professionals from the local councils and other organisations.

This summary explains what the inspectors found and what Ofsted says needs to be improved.

## What is being done well?

- Inspectors saw some really good work by IROs to help children to be involved in their plans and reviews, and to make their wishes and feelings known to the people helping them
- IROs usually met with children before review meetings to get to know them better.
- When IROs were able to spend more time with children, they were more likely to be understood, and their views and hopes for the future taken into account in reviews and in planning their care.
- Social workers usually kept IROs up to date about what was happening to children.
- Some IROs had begun to support children to chair their own reviews.

- Most children that inspectors spoke to were happy with what the the IRO was doing to help them.

## What needs to be improved?

- IROs in most local councils have been much too slow to take on all the new responsibilities they were given in 2011.
- IROs in most local councils were responsible for too many children, and sometimes had too many additional duties. This meant that they were too busy to do all the things they should be doing for children. In particular, they often didn't have enough time to speak to children and listen to their views.
- IROs' managers didn't always look at the work of IROs closely enough to make sure that they were helping children and young people.
- IROs didn't always challenge councils strongly enough if action wasn't being taken quickly enough to help children.
- When decisions about children's futures were made in reviews, they often weren't clear enough. It wasn't always obvious who should be doing what, and by when. This meant it was sometimes hard for IROs to check whether agreed actions had been taken, and that the plans for children's futures were the right ones.
- Children and young people weren't always asked about where they would like reviews to be held, or about who they would like to attend the reviews.
- Most children and young people took part in their reviews, but not all children were helped to be involved as well as they could have been.
- IRO services are expected to write an annual report that explains to 'corporate parents' what they think should be done to improve things for looked after children. The children and the general public should be able to read the report. Inspectors didn't see many good examples of these reports and only a very small number were available for children or the general public to read.
- IROs didn't always work closely enough with Cafcass workers, sometimes known as 'Children's Guardians'. (Cafcass workers make sure that children's views are heard by judges who need to make decisions about whether children should live with their families.) IROs should be fully involved in these discussions and decisions so that they can help children and make sure the plans for their future are right for them.
- IROs didn't speak often enough to children and young people on the Children in Care Council to hear their views, or to local councillors so that they could discuss what might need to change for looked after children.
- IROs didn't use the views of children and other people involved in reviews, such as social workers, to help them improve the services they provided.

## Recommendations

The Ofsted report about independent reviewing officers made some recommendations.

Local councils should:

- make sure that IROs have time to carry out all their responsibilities well, and, especially, that they can spend enough time with children and young people to hear their views properly
- make sure that IROs are supervised and guided well by their managers so that they provide the best support and challenge on behalf of children
- make sure that IRO services produce an annual report that tells 'corporate parents' what the IROs think should be done to improve services for children and young people in care.
- make sure the annual report is available to everyone, especially children and young people
- listen to what children, their families and professionals have to say about IRO services, so that they can improve the way they support looked after children
- make sure that plans to improve IRO support for children who need extra help (such as children who live a long distance from their friends and family, or children who have additional communication needs) are acted upon urgently.

Local councils and Cafcass should:

- make sure that IROs and Cafcass workers (sometimes known as 'Children's Guardians') work closely together so that, when decisions are made in court about children's futures, IROs are able to keep a close eye on plans for them.

The government should:

- look carefully at what is in all IRO annual reports so that it can think how best to improve help for all looked after children in the country.

The full report of what the inspectors found was published on 7 June 2013. If you would like to look at this, you can find it at: [www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/130113](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/130113).

You may also be interested in this report from the Children's Rights Director, published by Ofsted in 2012:

*Children's views on IROs: a report of children's views by the Children's Rights Director for England*, Ofsted, 2012;  
[www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/100207](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/100207).