

NORTH LINCOLNSHIRE COUNCIL

PEOPLE CABINET MEMBER

**INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICERS SERVICE ANNUAL REPORT FOR LOOKED
AFTER CHILDREN 2011-2012**

1. OBJECT AND KEY POINTS IN THIS REPORT

- 1.1 To seek approval of the annual report of the Independent Reviewing Officers service for Looked After Children from 1 April 2011 to 31 March 2012.

2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 2.1 The Government published new regulations and statutory guidance to improve the quality and consistency of care planning, placement and case review for looked after children in March 2010. These regulations and guidance have become the Government's implementation plan by the Department for Education to see through a revision programme for looked after children. The Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) Handbook 2010 is one of a suite of new regulations and statutory guidance, which was implemented on 1 April 2011. This suite revised the statutory guidance accompanying the Children Act 1989.
- 2.2 The IRO Handbook provides guidance to IROs about how they should discharge their distinct responsibilities to looked after children. It also provides guidance to local authorities on their strategic and managerial responsibilities in establishing an effective IRO service.
- 2.3 The IRO Handbook states that the IRO manager should be responsible for the production of an annual report for the scrutiny of the members of the corporate parenting board.

3. OPTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

- 3.1 The IRO Service Annual Report for Looked After Children 2011/12 is attached. The report makes reference to the areas outlined in the IRO Handbook for inclusion in an annual report. Therefore, the report does not have options for consideration and is information based with good practice and further development areas outlined.
- 3.2 Taking into consideration the new Ofsted inspection framework for child protection, there is an opportunity to pursue excellence by extending independent review to the Children In Need case management system.

4. **ANALYSIS OF OPTIONS**

4.1 There are no options for analysis as this report is to provide information.

5. **RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS (FINANCIAL, STAFFING, PROPERTY, IT)**

5.1 There are no resource implications at this time.

6. **OTHER IMPLICATIONS (STATUTORY, ENVIRONMENTAL, DIVERSITY, SECTION 17 - CRIME AND DISORDER, RISK AND OTHER)**

6.1 An Integrated Impact Assessment was not required due this report being information based with no proposal for policy, plan or strategy development.

7. **OUTCOMES OF CONSULTATION**

7.1 The annual report refers to the range of consultations and outcomes relating to the Independent Reviewing Officers service.

8. **RECOMMENDATIONS**

8.1 That Cabinet Member approves the IRO Service Annual Report for Looked After Children 2011/12.

DIRECTOR OF PEOPLE

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Date: 04/07/12

Background Papers used in the preparation of this report:

Independent Reviewing Officers Service Annual Report For Looked After Children – April 2011 – March 2012

Children and Young
People's Service



INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICERS SERVICE ANNUAL REPORT FOR LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN

April 2011 - March 2012

1 INTRODUCTION

The Government published new regulations and statutory guidance to improve the quality and consistency of care planning, placement and case review for looked after children in March 2010. This followed from the Children and Young Persons Act 2008 and the prior Care Matters agenda. These regulations and guidance, accompanying this new Act, have become the Government's implementation plan by the Department for Education to see through a revision programme for looked after children. The Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) Handbook 2010 is one of a suite of new regulations and statutory guidance, which was implemented on 1st April 2011. This suite has revised the statutory guidance accompanying the Children Act 1989.

The IRO Handbook provides guidance to IROs about how they should discharge their distinct responsibilities to looked after children. It also provides guidance to local authorities on their strategic and managerial responsibilities in establishing an effective IRO service. The aim is to give all looked after children the support and services that each one requires to enable them to reach their potential and to achieve improved outcomes for children. It replaces the Independent Reviewing Officers Guidance: Adoption and Children Act 2002 (effective from September 2004) which supported the Review of Children's Cases (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2004 that introduced IRO's on a statutory basis.

The IRO Handbook states that the IRO manager should be responsible for the production of an annual report for the scrutiny of the members of the corporate parenting board. This report should identify good practice but should also highlight issues for further development, including where urgent action is needed. In addition the IRO Handbook specifies a further six areas that an annual report should make reference to which are outlined in this report as follows:-

- Development of the IRO service including information on caseloads, continuity of employment and the make up of the team and how it reflects the identity of the children it is serving;
- Number of reviews that are held on time, the number that are held out of time and the reasons for the ones that are out of time;
- Extent of participation of children and their parents;
- Outcomes of quality assurance audits in relation to the organisation, conduct and recording of reviews;
- Procedures for resolving concerns, including the local dispute resolution process and it should include an analysis of the issues raised in dispute and the outcomes;
- Whether any resource issues are putting at risk the delivery of a quality service to all looked after children;

In addition to:

- Good practice, and
- Issues for development in 2011/12, including where areas for action in 2012/13.

The IRO Handbook also states that the annual report should be available as a public document and that it would be good practice to publish this on the local authority's website so that looked after children can easily access their corporate parent's assessment of the quality of its parenting.

2 SERVICE RESPONSIBILITIES

This section of the report will give an overview in relation to the areas outlined in the introduction, focusing on the key outcomes for children and young people who are looked after by North Lincolnshire.

2.1 Development of the IRO service including information on caseloads, continuity of employment and the make up of the team and how it reflects the identity of the children it is serving

North Lincolnshire has maintained a low number of children in care and remains lower than the statistical neighbour and England average.

There were 172 children and young people in full-time care as at March 2012. In addition, there were 6 children in short-break care under section 20, which was a reduction from 33 children in short-break care under section 20 in March 2011. The vast majority of these children have continued to receive short-breaks, yet under section 17 and are therefore not reviewed by IRO's. There were 16 young people aged 16 and 17 "relevant" care leavers, living in independence in March 2012, with pathway plans which compared to 24 young people in March 2011. The average IRO caseload was 64 cases in 2011/12 compared to 74 cases in 2010/11. The IRO Handbook states that an estimated caseload of between 50 to 70 children for a full time IRO would represent good practice in the delivery of a quality service.

As part of a service review, a Principal Social Worker delegation was created which increased the IRO capacity by 0.5. The team members have changed during 2011 with a newly appointed Principal Social Worker and an IRO joining the team. A child protection conference chair has taken on some IRO responsibilities as a developmental opportunity. An IRO is left the service at the end of March upon gaining promotion in another local authority. The Service Manager has remained the same throughout these changes.

All IRO's and child protection conference chairs are qualified, registered and experienced social workers, as is the Service Manager. They have extensive experience of communicating and working with children and young people. They

have knowledge about what makes for good quality practice in safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children with an understanding of the relevant legal processes. In respect of the team’s collective knowledge of diversity and children’s identity, the staff team have backgrounds in working with children who have suffered significant harm from abuse and neglect and children with attachment difficulties, both as looked after children and children subject to child protection and child in need plans living in the community, including working with disabled children, care leavers and young people who have offended. The IRO’s and their manager are of White British ethnicity, where the vast majority of the population is White British. The most recent census showed that 2.46% of the local population was from a different ethnic group with Asian or British Asian making up the second largest group. The team continues to further enhance their knowledge in respect of Black and Minority Ethnic groups and have access to expert advice when needed to ensure children, young people and their families needs in terms of diversity and equality are fully considered during reviewing.

2.2 Number of reviews that are held on time, the number that are held out of time and the reasons for the ones that are out of time

As the table below indicates the looked after children reviews held within timescale for 2011/12 was 100% for children in full-time care. This reflects an effective system where high importance is given to the timely reviewing of care plans. There were 493 reviews for children/young people in full-time care during the year, compared to 480 last year.

For children and young people in short-break care 100% of reviews were held within timescale. This year there were a total of 13 reviews compared to 118 in 2010/11. This reflects the change in legal status from section 20 to section 17 for a number of children and young people receiving short breaks.

This demonstrates an effective IRO service including the necessary administration.

Percentage of Looked After Children that had Statutory Reviews within timescale

	31/03/06	31/03/07	31/03/08	31/03/09	31/03/10	31/03/11	31/03/12
%Mainstream reviews on time	92%	98.1%	100%	100%	100%	99.3%	100%
%Short break reviews on time	N/a	N/a	N/a	99%	100%	100%	100%

2.3 Extent of participation of children and their parents

The IRO has key statutory duties to:

- ensure that any ascertained wishes and feelings of the child concerning the case are given due consideration by the appropriate authority;
- perform any other function which is prescribed in regulations, for example to ensure that children have been informed of their rights, including how to make a complaint.

The IRO is responsible for making sure that the child understands how an advocate could help and her/his entitlement to one. This could be a formal advocate or someone already in the child's network.

Through a range of methods, 100% of children/young people both in full-time and short break care participated in their review during the year. In a small number of cases where children have said that they did not know how to make a complaint, this has been explained to them. In cases where children or young people said that they would like an advocate or the IRO determined that this would benefit them, they have been linked to the Children and Young Person's Advocate or have nominated an advocate to support them in their review or speak on their behalf.

Parents are routinely consulted with before reviews and invited to them. In circumstances where it has not been appropriate or practicable for them to attend all or part of the review, a separate review meeting/discussion has been held with them regarding their child/young person's care plan.

In terms of feedback from children, young people and their parents in relation to the organisation and conduct of reviews this is outlined in the section below.

2.4 Outcomes of quality assurance audits in relation to the organisation, conduct and recording of reviews

There is routine management oversight into the organisation, conduct and recording of reviews. The Principal Social Worker allocates cases to IRO's daily and audits the administrative arrangements of reviews weekly and monthly to ensure that written consultations and invitations are sent out to children, young people, carers and other significant adults/professionals within 10 working days prior to the review.

There has been written consultation prior to a review with all children, young people, their parents/carers, school/pre-school, Specialist Nurse for looked after children and any other relevant adults in all cases. In almost all cases these consultation documents have been sent out at least ten working days before the review and earlier around school holidays to capture school views. In the event that a significant change has been proposed to a child's care plan, a review has been held to best match the child's timescale, for example at short notice in care

proceedings, yet consultation with the child, their parents and relevant others has been upheld.

In terms of the conduct of reviews, there has been thorough pre-review consultation yet the review as a child-centred meeting has been consistently evidenced during management oversight, including during supervision of IRO's and reading review records.

In most cases IRO's have offered children and young people a discussion in private prior to their review, subject to age and understanding. In some cases, a formal pre-meeting has not been necessary, for example where the IRO and child/young person have already established a relationship and chooses not to meet their IRO prior, their placement remained stable and there were no significant changes planned for the foreseeable future. For babies and younger children, it is not always necessary or appropriate to see the child alone. In these cases the IRO has observed the child in placement and used observation or methods of play to establish their wishes, feelings and understanding.

The service has developed and piloted an Independent Reviewing Observation Framework, which will be implemented and undertaken by peers and senior managers in 2012/13.

The post review views for children, young people and their parents are shown below for April 2011 to March 2012. This regular feedback about the conduct of reviews from the perspective of children, young people and parents is overseen by the IRO after the review who makes any necessary response or changes to the individual child's benefit when issues are raised. The Service Manager oversees the collation of this feedback and completes a quarterly evaluation of all review views. The key messages are turned into service planning to ensure a continual responsive and effective service, taking account of the influences of children, young people and their parents/carers views.

From April 2011 to March 2012 children and young people who fed back after their review said that they were given time to speak to their IRO in 92% of cases and thought that they were able to give their views in 100% of cases. 92% said that the right people were invited to their review. Over 98% said that they understood what had been agreed, in terms of care planning for them and 96% were happy with what was planned. 90% knew how to make a complaint. In terms of whether the date, time and place of the review being to their liking, 98% agreed with all three of these criteria.

This is excellent feedback and reflects the strong practice of engaging with children and young people and including them in decision-making.

Few children and young people said that they were not given time to speak with their IRO before their review. Mainly this was due to the young person declining the offer to speak to their IRO. The service had made sure that children's views, wishes and feelings and rights are considered at reviews, through other means

where they have been unable to talk with them prior to the review, for example by meeting with them after the review or offering the Children and Young Person's Advocate to meet with them.

There were 2 children and young people who were unhappy with the aim of their care plan. After full consideration of these children's cases, the IRO service concluded that the right care plans were in place. On these occasions social workers and the IRO take the time to further discuss the reasons for the care plan with individual children and young people.

There were 5 children and young people who said that they did not know how to make a complaint and in all cases were given a leaflet and the process was explained again. All children and young people are sent a complaints leaflet, designed by children and young people, when they become looked after and the IRO explains the process, yet some children need it continually explaining to help them understand. IRO's have heightened awareness to ensuring an understanding of this process.

All children and young people who wished to be linked to the Children and Young Person's Advocate were referred and subsequently seen by her or advocacy was offered.

From April 2011 to March 2012 the feedback from parents following their child or young persons review was also highly positive, indeed 100% of parents said that they were able to give their views and understood what was agreed for their child/young person in terms of care planning, with 89% being happy about the planning. 95% said that the date, time and venue of the review were suitable and 92% said that they knew how to make a complaint.

There were two main themes. A very small minority of parents were unhappy with the aim of the care plan for their child yet they understood the reasons for the plan. Secondly, a very small number of parents said that they did not know how to make a complaint. The written consultation form sent to parents incorporates how to make a complaint. Complaints forms are always sent to parents at the start of the reviewing process and further explanations are given at reviews or at other times, if necessary.

2.5 Procedures for resolving concerns, including the local dispute resolution process and an analysis of the issues raised in dispute and the outcomes

The Care Planning Dispute Resolution Policy within North Lincolnshire has been updated to comply with the new 2010 regulations and guidance. A key function of the IRO is to resolve problems arising out of the care planning process. Within North Lincolnshire IRO's have established positive and constructive working relationships with social workers and their managers. However, they are all experienced social workers and authoritative professionals who can provide a critical perspective and challenge, if necessary. Likewise, this is applicable at the

level of Service Management within Specialist Services. The IRO will work with the local authority Complaints Officer and Children's Advocate where necessary.

In very few cases the IRO had raised an issue relating to care planning. Where this related to the implementation of a decision relating to the care plan, the IRO had agreed a remedial timescale and monitored the action to successful completion. In these very few cases the resolution of the issues had been reached informally at either the level of IRO/social worker and their manager, which is stage one or at Service Manager level, which is stage two of the Care Planning Dispute Resolution Policy. These few matters were resolved in a timescale to meet the child's needs. Solutions had been expedited in all cases with no cases being taken up to the level of senior management. There has been no referral to Cafcass.

2.6 Any resource issues putting at risk the delivery of a quality service to all looked after children

There are no resource issues having such an affect.

The Children and Young People in Care Strategy 2011 – 2013 contains the strategic priorities that are actively being pursued to ensure a quality service for all looked after children.

2.7 Good practice

Services for children in care are a North Lincolnshire Council priority. The current administration has made a commitment to children, front line service delivery and the finance to support this within the 2012 – 2015 budget programme.

All cases have been reviewed in accordance with the timescales set out in the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review regulations 2010 and the statutory guidance. Additional reviews have been held where the IRO has determined this necessary due to a significant change in the child's life or in circumstances where a review must be held, for example prior to a child leaving care before the age of 18 and becoming a "relevant" child. This timely and effective reviewing of children and young people's care plans has underpinned the work and commitment of social workers to ensure that care planning has remained on track to meet the planned outcomes and permanency for children and young people.

Highly effective practice has been demonstrated by social workers in the large majority of instances. Care plans have consistently addressed permanency by the child or young person's second review.

Social workers in North Lincolnshire are developed through training and supervision to be skilled, capable and knowledgeable, in relation to the key skills

necessary in working with looked after children, such as court skills, attachment, life story work and preparing reports for the adoption panel.

North Lincolnshire developed a Risk Analysis model in 2011 which was piloted and subsequently implemented in relation to children in care cases during assessment processes, as part of the Public Law Outline and at points such as placement with parents or connected persons.

As outlined above, the feedback from children and young people is that they understand the planning for them, which is an evidence base for the highly effective practice of social workers.

There is high quality participation of looked after children and young people at the individual, service and strategic levels which continues to be an outstanding feature. The views and voices of looked after children and young people in North Lincolnshire are actively sought through many methods during their time in care and after they have left care. During 2011/12 a Children in Care and Care Leavers Participation Report has been produced quarterly, outlining events and activities involving children and young people and their key messages from the array of participation methods such as the work of the Children in Care Council, Children's Homes Children's Meetings, the Quarterly Question (asked at statutory visits), Review Views (outlined above in this report), Exit Interviews (for children/young people changing placements or leaving care) and the involvement of the Children and Young Person's Advocate. This document outlines a vast amount of participation information gathered in numerous ways from children and young people that is turned into service planning. A similar child and young person friendly newsletter called the Upd8 Newsletter feeds back key service improvements made, reflecting the voices of children in care and care leavers in North Lincolnshire. This is a great achievement by colleagues across Specialist Services within the local authority working with children in care. The newsletters show how central and important the participation of children and young people are to practice and service delivery and the responsiveness, difference and improvements made due to their views.

The Children and Young People's Advocate is highly active with children in care when they choose such advocacy. There is a culture of informing children and young people of their rights to advocacy and access to this provision. During April-December 2011, the Children and Young People's Advocate was involved with 29 children and young people following referrals for support.

The Corporate Parenting Group chaired by the Lead Member for Adults and Children utilised a Creative Conversation model with children and young people in October 2011 and February 2012, which clearly placed children's questions and views in the middle of the discussion. Ideas by children and young people about future venues and how the Creative Conversations will develop were generated for future use.

The Children and Young People's Plan 2010-13 and the Children and Young People in Care Strategy 2011 – 2013 underpin the values, clear vision and ambition and strategic priorities that continue to focus the work with children and young people in care and care leavers. This has been communicated to staff through a number of events and conversations. Elected members and senior officers across the council and its partners refreshed the pledge to children in care and care leavers in early 2011.

The Independent Reviewing Service worked collaboratively with colleagues within the Children In Care Case Management team, the Child in Need/Child Protection team and others during 2010 and the beginning of 2011 to update procedures, policies and protocols in relation to the whole suite of new regulations and statutory guidance including the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 and the IRO Handbook 2010. The new regulations and guidance were implemented locally in April 2011 and considerable cross team work has taken place since implementation to embed these into practice and service delivery to children in care, those in short breaks, former looked after children in custody, working alongside the Youth Offending Service and to young people in transition to adulthood.

This work has included revising the care plan and review record to reflect practitioner's views and enhance practice and performance reporting around the child's experience and involvement and developing pre review visits to children and young people by IRO's. It has further developed the practice of additional reviews for children and young people where there have been significant changes to their care plan. As part of the Children and Young People's Service Performance Improvement Framework the IRO/Children in Care Outcomes monthly meetings were established in January 2012 to overview and evaluate the impact of the IRO's responsibilities and compliment the longstanding Children in Care Outcomes meetings.

BAAF facilitated training to staff on the new regulations and guidance in February and March 2011. The IRO Service Manager and Children In Care Case Management Service Managers attended the DFE training on the regulations and guidance in March 2011 and this was disseminated to managers within Specialist Services later in the month followed by a training seminar for social work staff.

2.8 Issues for development in 2011/12, including areas for action in 2012/13

In the previous annual report the areas for development in 2011/12 were as follows:

1. Over 2011/2012 the key area for further development is for the Independent Reviewing service to embed the IRO Handbook in practice. The service will implement a programme of audits to ensure compliance with the IRO Handbook. This will include continued regular and routine feedback from children, young people and parents and auditing of case and review records. Due to the new requirement in the IRO Handbook this will be extended to feedback from social workers and direct observation of IRO's. The auditing will ensure that children and young people are provided with opportunities to have their say and influence their plans that affect them, including through a pre-review meeting or discussion and that they are provided with independent advocacy or an advocate from their own network and access to trusted adults. This will incorporate children and young people having comprehensive care plans, including a plan for permanence with support through life transitions into early adulthood and evidence of progression to meet expected outcomes.

2. The service will continue to support the Children in Care Council to further improve services for children in care and care leavers by the continued development of consultation, participation and feedback processes to ensure that children and young people are involved, understand planning for them and that they feel safer. The service, alongside colleagues who work with children and young people in care and care leavers, will also continue to demonstrate effectiveness and further development through being responsive to the child and young persons voice.

The Independent Reviewing Service has completed these actions as follows:

1. The IRO Handbook has been embedded successfully. There has been routine feedback from children, young people and parents throughout 2011/12 as evidenced in this report.

2. The service has continued to maintain links with the Children in Care Council to further improve services for children in care and care leavers through consultation, participation and feedback processes. The Children in Care and Care Leavers annual and quarterly participation reports evidence this focus on the voice children in care and care leavers and the difference that have been made.

There is no action needed for 2012.

The areas for development in 2012/13 are:

- Continue to enhance participation in the reviewing processes by further developing the IRO/Children in Care Outcomes monthly meetings to analyse and evaluate the effectiveness of the IRO's service and further developing the quality and effectiveness of pre review meetings/discussions, or observations of younger children, by IRO's to promote the voice of the child;
- Monitoring areas of improvement by implementing and establishing the IRO Observation framework, including QA of review records.

Annex 1 – Summary of the new 2010 Regulations and Guidance and key areas of change

The Government issued new statutory guidance for local authorities and IRO's in March 2010 on care planning and reviewing arrangements for looked after children, which was implemented on 1st April 2011. The IRO Handbook provides guidance to IROs about how they should discharge their distinct responsibilities to looked after children. It also provides guidance to local authorities on their strategic and managerial responsibilities in establishing an effective IRO service. The aim is to give all looked after children the support and services that each one requires to enable them to reach their potential and to achieve improved outcomes for children. It replaces the 2004 guidance, Independent Reviewing Officers guidance: Adoption and Children Act 2002, which introduced IRO's on a statutory basis.

The IRO Handbook was issued as part of a suite of statutory guidance which set out how local authorities should carry out the full range of responsibilities in relation to care planning, placement and review for looked after children. Namely, the guidance includes:

- The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 2: Care Planning, Placement and Case Review 2010 including the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations (England) 2010
- The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 3: Planning Transition to Adulthood for Care Leavers including the Care Leavers (England) Regulations 2010
- The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services
- The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 5: Children's Homes
- IRO Handbook – Statutory Guidance for independent reviewing officers and local authorities on their functions in relation to case management and review for looked after children
- Family and Friend Care: Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities 2010
- Short breaks: Statutory Guidance on how to safeguard and promote the welfare of disabled children using short breaks 2010
- The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations: Local authority responsibilities towards former looked after children in custody including the Visits to Former Looked After Children in Detention (England) Regulations 2010
- Adoption Statutory Guidance: The Adoption and Children Act 2002 2011
- Sufficiency: Statutory Guidance on securing sufficient accommodation for looked after children 2010

The statutory duties of the IRO are to:

- monitor the local authority's performance of their functions in relation to the child's case
- participate in any review of the child's case
- ensure that any ascertained wishes and feelings of the child concerning the case are given due consideration by the appropriate authority
- perform any other function which is prescribed in regulations, for example to ensure that children have been informed of their rights, including how to make a complaint.

A child/young persons care plan is prepared before they are placed in care or if this is not practicable, within 10 working days of the start of the placement. As a minimum regulatory requirement, a review of the child's care plan should take place within 20 working days, 3 months after the first review and thereafter within 6 months. Where there is a need for significant changes to a child/young person's care plan then the date of the review should be brought forward. No significant change to the care plan can be made unless it has been considered at a review, unless this is not reasonably practicable.

In discharging these duties, the IRO has a number of specific responsibilities which include:

- promoting the voice of the child
- ensuring that plans for looked after children are based on a detailed and informed assessment, are up-to-date, effective and provide a real and genuine response to each child's needs
- identifying any gaps in the assessment process or provision of service
- making sure that the child understands how an advocate could help and his/her entitlement to one
- offering a safeguard to prevent any 'drift' in care planning for looked after children and the delivery of services to them
- monitoring the activity of the responsible authority as a corporate parent in ensuring that care plans have given proper consideration and weight to the child's wishes and feelings and that, where appropriate, the child fully understands the implications of any changes made to his/her care plan.

The key changes to the role and function of the IRO in the broadest sense are:

- when a child first becomes looked after that a named IRO will be appointed. The intention is that this should enable continuity in the oversight of their case and to enable the IRO to develop a consistent relationship with the child.

- an extension of the IRO monitoring role from monitoring the local authority's performance of its functions in relation to the child's **review** to monitoring such performance in relation to the child's **case**. The intention is to give the IRO a more effective independent oversight of the child's case and ensure that the child's interests are protected.
- for the IRO to ensure that the local authority give due consideration to any views expressed by the child. This is intended to reinforce the duty to give consideration to the child's wishes and feelings when making any decision in respect of them.
- a new flexibility for the IRO to adjourn review meetings if these would be unproductive due to a lack of key documentation.
- that the IRO must speak in private with each child prior to each review to personally establish their wishes and feelings of the issues to be covered. This is intended to ensure that the child is properly consulted on matters relating to their care and can contribute to the content of their review meeting.
- that a referral by an IRO to Cafcass can be considered at any time and not as a last resort. The intention is to reinforce the authority to challenge poor practice around the child's case.

The guidance also outlines other IRO duties in relation to planning transition to adulthood throughout a child's care and in relation to specific groups of children, for example, children receiving short breaks, children with additional communication needs or who are within the youth justice system.

There are additional provisions within the guidance, for example, for the local authority to have a system in place that provides its IRO's with access to independent legal advice.

More detailed and tighter processes are outlined to ensure that the IRO is kept fully informed of the progress of the child's case in care proceedings. The guidance refers to close liaison with Cafcass/Children's Guardians and with the local authority legal section, plus submission of review reports to the court. The IRO continues to have a key function in the dispute resolution process to resolve problems arising out of the care planning process.

The role and functions of the IRO manager are prescribed, which in summary include providing oversight, professional advice and management support to each IRO, ensuring the quality of service delivery, ensuring regular and routine feedback from parents, children and social workers, auditing records and direct observation of IRO's, contributing to the effective arrangements for looked after children to communicate with senior managers, ensuring that the size of IRO caseloads enables them to comply with primary legislation, regulations and guidance and the writing of an annual report for the scrutiny of the corporate parenting board.

There are two key areas of change as follows.

Firstly, a key statutory implication from this guidance relates to the significant strengthening of the ongoing monitoring of the child's progress by the IRO, which brings with it the potential of more reviews to change a child's care plan. Reviews will have to be convened in certain circumstances, for example where there is a proposal for a child to leave care before the age of 18, for a child to move from a regulated to an unregulated setting, where their change of placement would interrupt their Key Stage 4 education or where a settled child will move placement. In addition, reviews will have to be considered due to other major significant changes, for example, to a child's contact, if they make a complaint or due to offending or being missing. There may be additional consultation work with children as the IRO should consult with the child, where appropriate, and take their views into account when considering significant changes/events in the child's life.

Secondly, a key implication is the delivery of a greater range of functions by IRO's, whilst the management of their caseloads is ensured to comply with primary legislation, regulations and guidance and to provide a continued quality of service to children and an overall effective IRO service.