

IRO Thematic Audit May 2021

Purpose:

The IRO thematic audit was undertaken;

- 1) To understand everyday practice with children and families
- 2) To identify themes across the IRO Service
- 3) To explore learning to help the IRO Service continue to improve the service to children and families

The IRO thematic audit is best understood in conjunction with the IRO Annual Report which relates to our practice between April 2019 –September 2020, and provides quantitative data and the IRO Service Independent Management Report to the Serious Case Review for Chloe which was submitted in January 2021.

This will provide the reader with the context of continual improvement in the IRO's practice while recognising the impact of the Covid Pandemic

A strengths based approach is favoured, highlighting practice dilemmas for the IRO and offering reflections for future learning.

Methodology:

Four Quality Assurance Managers observed 14 Child Looked After Reviews in the month of April and May 2021. The views of children, parents, carers and social workers were sought where possible and every IRO was observed at least once. To gain a wide sample of practice 24 dip samples of children's records were undertaken alongside the observations.

IRO involvement in a child's life, is less frequent than many professionals given the expectations of cyclical meetings to monitor the progress of children's plans over time. IRO are required to convene change of circumstances CLA Reviews whenever there is a significant change of care plan – such as a change of care arrangements – hence they often meet with children whilst they are experiencing significant life events and transitions. IRO focus may also change in respect of permanency and transitional points in care as children's legal status changes (for instance from being accommodated with the agreement of their parents under S20, to being subject of Care Orders under S31, or deprived of their liberty when sectioned or subject to Secure Accommodation) The child's age is also significant. For this reason the sample of children included children at every stage of their journey in care, albeit young adults who had left care were not included.

The templates used by the auditors were written to support auditors focus on relationship based practice and impact. The templates used are attached in Appendice. Having concluded auditing and gathered feedback the auditors met to distil findings and identify themes and learning. A narrative approach has been purposefully adopted to provide the reader an overview of practice, with a qualitative focus on IRO activity.

Strengths

We see preparation for children's meetings. Working virtually continues to support IRO linking with the network before meetings. This also facilitates a level of continuous monitoring through IRO inclusion in key meetings and Panels which was not possible when all practice was face to face. Social work teams actively update IRO's about significant changes in children's circumstances and find IRO's more accessible.

Consultation documents when completed by children, carers and parents are used by IROs. There are better quality Progress Reports that are also more available from social work services but less often shared with participants before the meeting itself.

Without exception IRO went to great lengths to support children to be part of their meeting. IRO used various approaches to achieve this based on the wishes and feelings of children and their professional judgement. Older children often stayed in the entirety of their meetings with younger children having separate meetings or joining parts. Wider professional participation is frequently facilitated by using a series of meetings, to keep meetings that children are in smaller, and it is apparent that the concept of the child looked after review as a single meeting does not always reflect our practice.

Where children and young people were included they told us that they heard nice things about themselves and that it was helpful to get things they needed. Another child commented that listening at the meeting was helpful.

IROs spoke with parents before or after the child's meeting and wherever possible included them in children's meetings. We saw IRO's recognising important people in children's lives by including an uncle and privileging the relationship between a young parent and their previous foster carer (who is now caring for their child looked after) IRO are thoughtful about how to involve parents. They appreciate the impact that parent's presence can have on dynamics in meetings between children and carers and are conscious of the requirement to divert what could be distressing interaction between important adults in the child's life outside of the meeting.

Where a parent had been supported to attend her child's meeting, after a very difficult initial child looked after review, they commented that the IRO had changed the way the meeting was led. They felt genuinely heard and that they were respected as a parent. Another explained that the meeting was helpful and the auditor identified that the parent valued the overview of her child's care that the meeting provided her with.

There is a focus on children's health, education and social relationships and IRO consistently discuss the key areas that the IRO handbook stipulates they should address.

Good quality decisions were seen to capture not only the discussions within the child's meeting, but the continuous monitoring of IRO's over the child's journey in care. We saw examples of Midway Reviews being used to track the progress of plans for children and IRO's commenting on the quality of care plans. IRO footprint continues to be maintained and in the majority of children's records the IRO presence can be felt.

IROs show interest and care for children and their wellbeing. This was evident in their interaction with children and warm language. We saw IRO's carefully listening to children's body language via MS teams. There was a sense of IRO ownership of their role and of wanting the very best for children in our care. After a period of change in the IRO staff group many children still continue to benefit from a consistent IRO.

IRO's speak with children and practitioners about the child's story and there were examples of careful thought about how children understand what is happening now and how they might understand their story as care experienced adults. Social workers report that discussions with IROs are helpful and suggest different approaches and other ways of approaching difficult issues without supplanting the social worker and team manager relationship.

Connected to this there is a continuing improvement in letters to children with good examples focusing on key messages to the child (a maximum of 3 issues), often supported by images or emoticons and using age appropriate language. There are examples of letters to several children with disabilities that are bespoke using PEC symbols and/or a combination of photos of the children themselves. This continues to be supported by input from Speech and Language Therapist Emma Carwardine, and sessions facilitated by Hendrix Hammond, who is a qualified family therapist.

Dilemmas

To ensure that IRO's cover all the area's required of them by the IRO handbook, there was a similarity in agenda across children's meetings. This brought a focus on key area's such as health, education and social relationships that overall was positive.

This can also bring a focus on ensuring that process or task were on track e.g. 'has the PEP happened?', 'has the health assessment happened?', 'has the SGO assessment progressed?', or 'contact reviewed' 'refer for CAMHS'. Whilst it is vitally important that the IRO performs this quality assurance role, this can unintentionally divert from exploratory conversations with children, parents and the network that focus on trauma and how to support the child and carers to manage trauma. This can also introduce language that is unhelpful to children as it has no meaning to them.

At times, this process focus meant that the higher context of the plan's direction was not always explored i.e. the potential return of children home or the barriers that prevented the securing of a Special Guardianship Order. Nonetheless IROs were sighted on the progress of the plan overall.

When these questions were explored in CLA Reviews it could be difficult. Social workers, while valuing the contribution of IRO to care planning and discussion outside of CLA Reviews, in one instance felt blamed by the IRO identifying that there had been drift and delay during the meeting when a parent was present. More often these bigger questions were explored entirely separately from the meeting with the child but did not always appear in recordings of the review itself. All IROs could readily explain the direction of travel for the children that they worked with. We also saw key interventions by IROs in care planning, such as a return home which had not been sufficiently assessed, contact proceeding without the relevant contact assessment, and a delayed International Adoption.

The increased participation of children and adults can amplify these effects as IROs will sensibly avoid distressing conversations in the context of the child's meeting unless they are confident that the child can be held emotionally in that moment by them or others. This is another moment when a process or task may be suggested for others rather than an exploration with the child of the meaning of their distress or behaviours. The impact of Covid can be felt here. There is some understandable uncertainty in IROs about the strength of their relationship with newly allocated children whom many have only ever met virtually and even then infrequently. With children that IROs have a good relationship with discussions in children's meetings are more discursive and this can be seen in some letters to children and decisions. Overall we are struggling to capture the nuance of our work with children particularly the preparation and planning that is undertaken and the way in which we record the CLA Review as a process rather than a finite event.

Consultation Documents are required as part of the CLA Review process and evidence participation of others and inform planning of children's meeting. These are regularly distributed by CLA admin. However our current documents are not consistently used and returned to IROs, with mixed feedback about how helpful or accessible these are for those completing them or IRO using them.

The reviewing of previous decisions is routine in all CLA Reviews, this is important in demonstrating accountability of the local authority. We also saw that these decisions did not always (and admittedly not all would be expected to) become part of the child or young person's Care or Pathway Plan. This creates a disconnect between what the IRO is reviewing in the meetings (s) and what is recorded as the child's stated plan. We saw that Care Plans are not always the central document to a CLA Review albeit IROs consistently seek their availability and their updating especially Pathway Plan Reviews to support transitions'.

As a service we continue to face dilemmas about when the threshold to raise a formal escalation is met. There is concern at whether these are effective ways of resolving practice issues for children and progressing children's care plans which is our highest context. This is particularly the case when the use of complaints, advocacy or informal discussion is achieving the same objectives. In this audit several issues were seen where a CERP would have been merited. This included a child not being visited in timescale and over a number of months, the repeated failure to enact previous review decisions in the context of re-allocation of social workers and decision making being made outside of the appropriate level of operational management.

IROs are experienced practitioners and they bring this to their role and approaches. This creates diversity which is valuable. That diversity is apparent in our diverse understanding of the CLA Review process for children. This is indelibly influenced by our individual positions of what the IRO role means in practice and in the local authority context. This manifests itself most commonly in the extent to which IROs will push the boundaries between reviewing and co-producing care plans at risk of authoring a plan.

Impact of IRO Service

IROs seek to ensure that children, parent, carers feel heard. Children's meetings and wider IRO involvement can be a platform for children and parents to understand children's care plans.

IRO's are contributing to the stability of care arrangements for children by focusing on health, education and social relationships. Many children appear settled and well

IRO's support colleagues to think about the child's story within the CLA Review process.

Midway Reviews support progress when used well and where IRO's are specific in linking the progress of care plans to outcomes for children. Overall there is a higher level of oversight and IRO's continue to contribute to practice by supporting discussions about relationship based practice and focusing on children's needs in the context of care planning.

IROs are intervening effectively on children's behalf on discrete care issues but continue to use informal means over and above formal escalation. This can obscure the impact that they have had to improve outcomes for children in care. This is also a measure of effective relationships with colleagues. These have been steadily improved over the last 2 years and accelerated by IRO accessibility while working virtually.

Conclusion with area's for development

Despite the impact of the Covid Pandemic the IRO Service has continued to develop. There is evidence of much good practice with children, parents, and professionals within the CLA Review process. There continues to be a spectrum of practice amongst IRO which is predominantly Good or Requiring Improvement. Examples of Inadequate practice are raised through individual management.

Our concerted focus on facilitating the participation of children and families in the CLA Review process over the last year and a half has raised compelling questions about our practice, the use of virtual technology and how IRO's execute their role.

To continue to develop our service there are area's outlined below that are well supported by our improved relationships with colleagues in operational area's and those that support practice such as the systemic practioners and Speech and Language Therapists. We need to continue to recognise that IRO's as individuals have different strengths but all have extensive experience with which to support best practice.

- Exploration of expectations around preparation and recording of preparation for CLA Review to show our 'working out'
- Developing consensus around what we expect our recording of the CLA Review to capture, particularly where we are using multiple meetings and modes. Our purpose in reviewing children's plans in this way and whom our primary audience is.

- Exploring how we balance the dilemma of procedural expectation laid out in the IRO handbook with the empowerment of children in their meetings, supporting an exploratory focus on children's trauma, narrative approaches in letter writing and reflecting on the learning from the Serious Case Review for Chloe.
- Consistent use of Consultation Documents by IRO, and review of Carer and Parent Consultation Documents in line with existing review of Child Consultation Documents by Ashleigh Searle and the Young Directors.
- Supporting IRO to formally raise concerns or issues while maintaining our collaborative approach to working with colleagues.

Recommendations

- Use of weekly groups and team meeting to workshop around the area's identified, particularly how a trauma based approach can be relevant to IRO practice.
- Inclusion of IRO in learning events by Croydon Safeguarding Partnership in respect of Chloe.
- Explore further peer learning between IRO to generate consistency of practice and build on buddying introduced as part of letter writing workshops and IRO involvement in audit activity
- Extend involvement of Hendrix Hammond in facilitating discussion around narrative approaches in the context of the Child Looked After Reviews and Letter Writing.
- Revise Foster Carer and Parenting Consultation forms in parallel with review of Child Consultation forms being led by Ashleigh Searle and Young Directors
- Revision of existing CERP's in conjunction with CP chairs and operational services.
- IRO Service Manager to share thematic audit with peer's IRO Service Managers in different borough's to seek feedback and new idea's