

RESEARCH BRIEFING

CARE PLANNING AND THE ROLE OF THE INDEPENDENT REVIEWING OFFICER (IRO)



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Why is this study important?

Effective care planning and review has long been seen as essential for the wellbeing of children in care. Since 2004 there has been a statutory system of 'independent reviewing officers' (IROs) to monitor local authority implementation of plans, promote children's participation in the process and provide an independent view on what best serves the interests of the child. IROs are independent of the line management of the case, but employees of the local authority, and ever since the role started there has been debate about their effectiveness and independence. In April 2011, new regulations and statutory guidance came into force tightening the requirements and strengthening the IRO's role.

Aim of the study

The aim of the study was to explore how the new regulations and guidance were being implemented, and understand the operation of the IRO role. The key research questions were;

- How are the 2010 care planning regulations and guidance being implemented?
- How effective are IROs for monitoring local authority plans, promoting children's wellbeing and managing their participation?
- What do parents and children think of the care planning and review process and the role of the IRO?
- What are the different roles and responsibilities of professionals involved and how are decisions made?

How was the study done?

The research was a mixed methods study of data from four local authorities including a case file study of 122 looked after children. Interviews with 54 social workers, 54 IROs, 15 parents and 15 young people were also carried out along with four inter-professional focus groups and two focus groups with young people. National questionnaires were also circulated for IROs (65 returns), social work managers (46), and children's guardians (39).

Key findings

- There has been much debate about whether IROs should be located in an independent body, rather than local authorities (LAs), and whether the role is necessary and a good use of resources. The researchers heard arguments on both sides, but overall the evidence suggests that IROs are able to achieve change for children through an

independent approach and collaborative working.

- The reality of the IRO role was found to be much more nuanced than the statutory guidance portrays it. The IRO Handbook states that they are 'not to manage the case, supervise the social worker or devise the care plan', but in the process of reviewing the cases, these lines could often be blurred. Many IROs said that they found themselves involved in making plans and performing other key roles, such as identifying problems and gaps in arrangements for children, keeping things on track and offering advice to social workers.
- Furthermore, although IROs are supposed to challenge the LA and have the power to refer a case to Cafcass if they cannot reach a satisfactory resolution, there is also a strong expectation in the statutory guidance that they will always try to resolve matters informally. Knowing when to move from one approach to the other was a key challenge for IROs. All preferred to use informal approaches and generally considered these to be more effective and efficient, but there was also evidence of them using formal challenge. Very few cases go all the way up to referral to Cafcass, because settlement is usually reached before then.
- On the questionnaires, a few IROs complained of being disregarded by LA managers, or pressured into not pursuing challenges, but this was not an issue in the interviews. There was a general recognition that the IRO role now has a higher profile and greater acceptance in local authorities.
- Being located within LAs was seen by many IROs as having advantages, in terms of access and influence, and they did not consider it to undermine their ability to be independent. Social workers also seemed to appreciate this. As one said 'I find [IROs] really helpful, because even though they are working for the local authority, they still come down on you like a ton of bricks if certain things haven't been done. And also, because they are part of the organisation, they are aware of the issues ... they are easily accessible to us, you know'.
- The group most critical of IROs, Cafcass children's guardians, saw IROs as merely 'rubber stamping' the LA's actions. In contrast, most IROs, social workers, managers, parents, and young people thought that IROs were sufficiently independent. For example, one parent said 'I think she [the IRO] is on everyone's side; she was a little bit for us and a little bit for the social worker, a big part for A [child] of course, I think she is trying to do the best for A, yeah'.
- Decision-making and service provision takes place in a wide range of internal and inter-agency contexts, including the courts, and this makes care planning and reviewing complex. Inevitably,

funding and resource availability play a large part in how plans are designed and implemented. IROs had different approaches to how actively they would get involved in inter-agency meetings and discussions.

- Many different individuals and organisations are involved with children in care, including the ‘corporate parent’ (the LA). Deciding who knows the child best and has the most valid opinion can be difficult as a result. Reviews can be a useful way of bringing together the key people, to exchange information and share views.
- The main challenge for IROs in undertaking their work was very high caseloads. The file study did find examples of times when recommendations from one review had not been completed by the next, with seemingly little action taken by IROs to find out why, and to ensure they were undertaken next time; however, it also found examples of sustained, high quality work and effective inter-professional collaboration.
- The interview and focus group discussions with children and young people suggest that most were positive about their IRO, although they could see differences between different workers. The participants valued warmth, humour and the ability to get things done.
- From the questionnaires, about half of IROs, 52% (33 respondents) felt they were not as effective as they would like to be when involving children. Reasons for this included high caseloads and poor quality tools for communicating with children. Despite that, there were examples of innovative and determined practice to help children and young people participate in their review meetings.
- The likelihood of children attending review meetings increased steadily with age. For those aged 5-9, 35% attended all or part of their review, rising to 50% of those aged 10-12, 65% of those aged 13-15, and 80% of young people aged 16 and over.
- Young people often complained that they did not enjoy the reviews or found them boring, but also, older children and young people often felt it was important to be there. A 16 year-old young man said ‘No one likes hearing difficult things, but then I would rather be in a meeting and talk about it with them, instead of them talking when I am not there’.

Key recommendations for policy and practice

Care planning

- In care planning and placement decisions, IROs and social workers need to take account of the difficult backgrounds of many of the children, the

developmental risks, and the likelihood of new strengths or problems emerging in the future. Carers need preparation and support.

- Permanence planning and contact arrangements need to consider how difficult histories of some family members and parents may impact on the wellbeing and development of children.
- Age on entry into care has a significant impact on care planning, and is an important factor in IRO monitoring. Social workers of pre-school children need to do timely assessments, and placement decisions need to be made swiftly. In middle childhood, children are less likely to be considered suitable for adoption, and social workers may have to work hard to identify and support kinship carers and good quality long-term foster carers. For adolescents, ensuring their safety and wellbeing, as well as considering their wishes and feelings, can be challenging. IROs and social workers need to plan for independence and provide ongoing support, whilst also addressing current needs.
- Decisions on sibling placement and/or contact must be based on good evidence and assessment of the needs of all the children, now and in the future

Reviews

- Reviews are a process, not just a meeting, and there are many ways to get the views of all the relevant people, including the child and his/her family, even if not all attend the meeting.
- IROs and social workers must be sensitive and flexible in listening and responding to views of children and young people about their reviews. Key considerations are time for preparation with the child, time of day, venue, who attends, and talking with the children after the review.
- Reviews are also an important opportunity to engage with parents. They are a good way to support them and help them to understand their continuing role and responsibility in their child’s life. IROs and social workers need to allow time for sufficient preparation and post-review follow up.
- Review recommendations need to be clear in who is responsible for what task, the timescales, and the monitoring arrangements. The study found instances where this did not happen.

Supporting care planning and review

- The administrative aspects of the planning and review process were identified as needing improvement. There were widespread complaints, from social workers and IROs, about the volume

of administrative work. Other common criticisms were about poor quality templates that are not fit for purpose, meaningful or user friendly, and duplication. The systems need to be improved in order to make it easier to maintain clear, up-to-date and useful records.

- Managers also need to consider that high caseloads were found to limit the capacity of social workers and IROs to engage with children and keep up-to-date with administrative tasks.

The IRO role and the IRO service

- It would be useful to implement training for social work teams about the IRO role and the care planning requirements. The IRO Handbook is a useful tool to inform other professionals about the tasks and responsibilities of the IRO role.
- IRO services need to develop a stronger collective 'voice' in their local authorities. Managers need to develop more effective mechanisms for identifying, disseminating and acting on the wider lessons that arise from individual cases.
- IRO services are improved by effective management, peer support and training.
- Local authorities will benefit if there are better systems for well-supported IROs to feed in collective concerns and influence policy development.

Strengths and limitations of the study

Strengths

The data from the children's case files was analysed from the time they entered care, giving a picture of the children's progress over time. The interviews with IROs and social workers focused on particular cases and took place after the case file analysis. In many instances, there had been further changes, showing the on-going and dynamic nature of care and care planning.

The national questionnaires set the findings from the four local authorities in a wider context, and confirmed the picture from the case file survey, interviews and focus groups.

Limitations

A limitation of the study is that it relies, predominantly, on what the people involved say happens, rather than what definitely does. This is clearly true of the interviews and questionnaires. Even case file records are summaries of what has happened from the perspective of the person writing them, and they are notoriously prone to errors and inconsistencies. But by using a range of sources and drawing on a variety of potentially contrasting perspectives, and by testing out the findings through feedback to practitioners, the researchers consider they have gained a reliable picture of real life practice, complete with its uncertainties, challenges and successes.

Where can I find out more?

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