

Foreword

There are almost 70,000 looked after children in England. Of this number

- 43,000 came into public care after abuse and neglect.
- 28,000 began to be looked after in the preceding year. 15,000 of those children were under the age of 10, and 8,000 were aged between 10 and 15.

For the great majority of us, it is impossible to imagine how these children feel, both before and after leaving their families. Even when the arrangements for them are working well, they are extremely vulnerable to misfortune or to being overlooked. For many, the outcome of their time in care is poor, despite best efforts to protect and help them.

The Independent Reviewing Officer must be the visible embodiment of our commitment to meet our legal obligations to this special group of children. The health and effectiveness of the IRO service is a direct reflection of whether we are meeting that commitment, or whether we are failing.

This thorough and clearly-written report by the research centre of the National Children's Bureau is the best survey of which I am aware of the current state of affairs in this field. It demonstrates two things. First, it is essential that IROs are given proper status and resources within local authorities. Second, they must use their unique position to fight the corner of the children for whom they are responsible. I have suggested elsewhere that the comforting cliché of the IRO as the local authority's 'critical friend' should be discarded. If IROs are going to do their job properly, they should be neither friends nor enemies of their fellow professionals – they should be independent.

It is 10 years since IROs were created in response to widespread concern about children in care being lost to sight. Yet the key conclusion of this study is that the IRO role in ensuring high-quality care planning is still to be fully realised. The report is full of examples of what can be achieved by a well-organised service, but it also uncovers the widespread problems that still exist. Here is how one child describes a review meeting:

"It's like you're sitting there like a ghost and there was like normal people in the room just speaking about you and you can't say anything because you're just like this ghost person."

The authors of this report have done what they can to equip others to ensure that fewer children feel this way and that as many as possible get the care they deserve.

Mr Justice Peter Jackson
Family Division Liaison Judge for the Northern Circuit