

NOTTINGHAMSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL
Annual Report of Independent Reviewing Officer [IRO] Service
April 2014 – March 2015

“To ensure that, through the independent review process, protection and care plans for children meet their individual needs and secure better outcomes for children and young people.”

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The Independent Chair Service (ICS) covers Nottinghamshire County and sits within the Safeguarding and Independent Review service area. The ICS is responsible for quality assuring practice in relation to children in public care or children subject to child protection processes and to promote effective interagency working. The Independent Chairs have continued to contribute to the development and promotion of good practice by addressing concerns regarding care planning for children, identifying areas of development and highlighting good practice.
- 1.2 We have two groups of staff that chair meetings and this report will focus on the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) part of the service. A separate report is available in respect of the Child Protection Coordinator part of the ICS. The IRO Handbook notes that the IRO Manager is responsible for the production of an annual report for the scrutiny of the members of the Corporate Parenting Board. This report will identify good practice but also highlight issues for further development and will be available as a public document via the County Council's website.
- 1.3 Progress against actions identified in the annual report year 2013-2014 will be addressed in the body of the report and are also detailed in Appendix A.

2 Purpose of service and legal context

- 2.1 The legal framework for the IRO service is set out in the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 and the IRO Handbook 2010. The role of the IRO is to ensure that Nottinghamshire County Council acts as a responsible corporate parent and the child's care plan fully reflects their current needs and is consistent with the local authority's legal responsibilities towards the child. The IRO assists the local authority to deliver best outcomes for Looked after Children.
- 2.2 In summary, there are two clear and separate aspects to the function of the IRO:
 - Chairing the child's review
 - Monitoring the child's case on an ongoing basis

- 2.3 This report will provide information and analysis detailing the impact and performance of the Nottinghamshire IROs over the past 12 months.

3 Staffing/workload

- 3.1 The profile of the IRO team consists of 14 staff (13.1 fte). As of 31st March there are 11 females (1 Black, 10 White British) and 3 male (White British). All IROs are qualified social workers with several of them having previous managerial experience within children's services. During the year we successfully recruited to one permanent position but recruitment is an ongoing activity in order to fill the 1.6 vacancies within the team which are currently covered by experienced agency staff.
- 3.2 The IRO Handbook 2010 states in order to carry out the overall roles and responsibilities as laid out in the Care Planning Regulations a full time IRO should ideally have a caseload of 50-70. Over the past year the LAC population in Nottinghamshire has remained stable at around the 850 mark and IROs have been increasingly able to take on more of the range of functions as set out in the IRO Handbook. There are a number of children receiving short breaks for less than 75 nights per year and for no longer than 24 continuous hours who have been allocated an IRO although they are not deemed to be looked after. The caseloads for IROs is averaging between 65-70. Within the team we have lead roles designated to IROs who develop specialist knowledge when working with children with disabilities, 56 in total, those who are unaccompanied asylum seeking children, 32 in total, and other vulnerable children within the looked after population. By taking on a specific lead role this helps broaden the practice and knowledge within the team and contributes to the profile of the team. Lead roles include participation of young people, liaison with CAFCASS/the Virtual School/Local Family Justice Board/Children in Care Council and foster carers meetings.
- 3.3 As part of their role IROs will whenever available attend Child Sexual Exploitation Strategy Meetings held in respect of Looked after Children (LAC) given their vulnerability and need for close monitoring. They also receive monthly information about LAC who go missing the most frequently so they can keep track of how this is being addressed and also make contact with the young people to identify what the safeguarding issues are and how these could be reduced in conjunction with other professionals involved. One of the key priorities over the year has been to strengthen and develop contact with more vulnerable children and young people.

4 CAFCASS and Regional events

- 4.1 There continues to be regular contact between Guardians and IROs, seminars and workshops occur twice a year and this is proving to strengthen the links between the two disciplines. In addition four regionally organised workshops have been arranged for 2015, this provides development opportunities across the region whilst promoting consistency and effectiveness. By developing links between CAFCASS and regional IROs

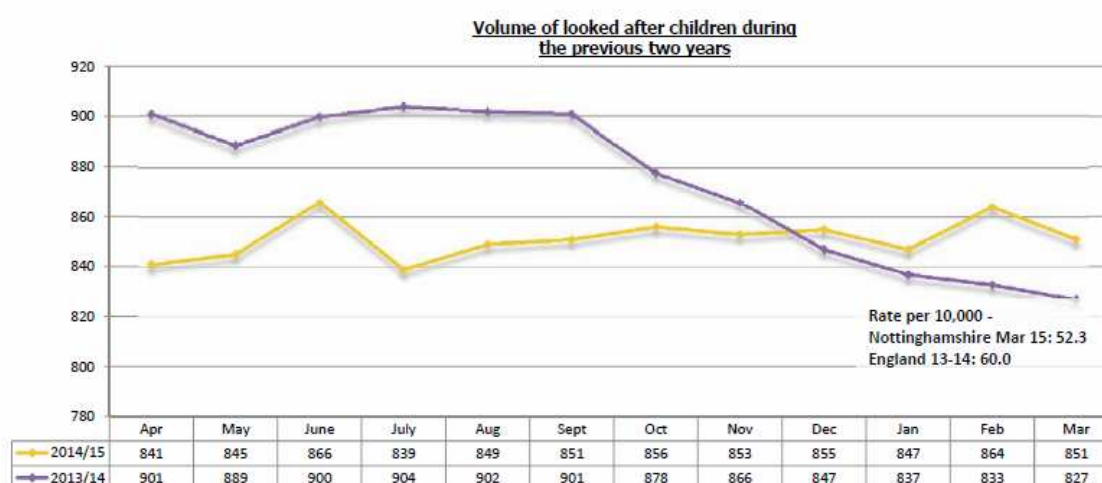
practice is shared and open discussions take place about outcomes achieved for LAC whilst debating any research which is being considered nationally. This also promotes and encourages networking between neighbouring authorities.

5 Business Support Staff

- 5.1 Over this past year IROs have been supported by a team of 7 business support staff, who provide a minute taking service up to 6-10 LAC meetings a week and other administrative support, including tracking looked after children reviews and alerts initiated by the IROs. They administer the initial review invites for children and young people and distribute all the minutes to all those who attended the review apart from the parents, who will receive their set of minutes from the social worker. The service managers continue to monitor the performance of IROs specifically around the timeliness of minutes, which has improved from the previous year from an average of 60% to 76% this year. Managers also audit the quality of the record of the LAC review produced by the IRO during supervision. The agendas for meetings have been reviewed over the past year and this is creating consistency in ensuring the voice of the child is integrated throughout and any safeguarding issues are documented and addressed.

6 Profile of LAC of Nottinghamshire

- 6.1 As at the end of March 2015, there were 851 children and young people looked after, this figure has remained stable throughout the year. The rate per 10,000 at the year-end was 52.3 which remain lower than the rates for statistical neighbours and the England average as at the end of 2013-14, which were 56.3 and 60 respectively.



- 6.2 It is noted there has been a steady percentage of children returning home, being made subject to a special guardianship order and also young people progressing onto independent living; these activities have contributed to the LAC population remaining stable throughout the year.
- 6.3 The number of LAC reviews chaired and completed by IROs between April-March 2015 was 2,263. The percentage of children whose looked after reviews were all held within timescale is calculated on a rolling basis for the previous 12 months and the percentage at the end of March 2015 was 90.5%. This figure is a slight improvement from the end of March 2014 which was 90.3%. This is below the local target of 98%, the primary reasons for this centre on late requests for initial LAC reviews but it has been noted that on occasion there has been a miscalculation of dates by IROs.

7 Children with Disabilities

- 7.1 Throughout this past year there have been a number of developments in relation to the approach undertaken with children who have disabilities. IROs encourage social workers to find the best person to complete and present the signs and symbols 'listen to me booklet' now available for children to use. More recently, reviews have been held using the person centred approach which makes them less adult orientated and more child/young person focussed. This particularly began with reviews for children with disabilities but its concept will be integrated into reviews for all LAC. The two IROs with a lead for children with disabilities meet regularly with youth workers attached to the Children in Care Council and social care team managers to review participation planning and to monitor the progress being made to enhance the views of disabled children.
- 7.2 The aim of person centred reviews is to ensure the child is at the centre of discussions and actions. This will identify what people like and admire about the child, what is important to them and what help and support they believe they need. There have been good examples of this approach taking place and with one particular social worker has been consistent when undertaking person centred work with his cases and this has produced a good balance of the child's wishes and feelings whilst including the adult's perspective on what is considered best for the child. Reports produced for these reviews reflect on the positive outcomes for the child and ensure the child is completely included.

8 Raising concerns/Dispute Resolution Process

- 8.1 An escalation process is in place which enables the IRO to resolve any issues arising out of the care planning process. In the first instance, the IRO will initiate and alert and seek to resolve the concerns with the social worker and team manager. A record of this discussion and the outcome will be placed on the child's file, however if the matter is not resolved within the required 10 day timescale the IRO with their manager will consider taking action by progressing to stage 1 which involves the operational service manager.

- 8.2 During the year, 137 alerts were initiated by IROs within social care, in comparison to last year where 192 were initiated which shows a reduced amount. Only 6% of LAC reviews resulted in an alert being initiated.
- 8.3 During the past year there have been a range of issues which have been identified and addressed. The themes that emerge from alerts relate to issues around drift and delay in respect of recommendations not being completed from the previous review; quality of pathway plans; health assessments not complete; assessments not complete where a decision is needed to progress the care plan; statutory visits not being undertaken and review being held out of timescale.
- 8.4 IROs continue to demonstrate their challenge and ongoing robust monitoring which the following examples illustrate:
- *With Case one three siblings were separated in order for them to thrive which had positive outcomes for them all. Oldest child was informed contact was ceasing with her younger siblings being adopted. This child was distraught on hearing this news as she played a significant caring role for her younger siblings. The IRO organised a professionals meeting after speaking with the child and challenged the decision. Contact was resumed after a risk assessment was completed and the adopters of the younger siblings were open to contact between the siblings.*
 - *With Case two the IRO initiated an alert by requesting the local authority, (LA) freeze the placement move of a young person who was going to be placed with her sibling whom she had lived with previously which resulted in the placement breaking down. The IRO was of the view this was not in the young person's best interests as this young person has been in a number of placements which have disrupted and led to her moving. From this challenge the IRO has ensured appropriate assessments are being undertaken through CAMHS and a multi-agency meeting will be arranged to consider the outcome of the assessments before any decisions are made about which is the best setting for the young person to be placed so all her emotional needs can be met.*
- 8.5 When considering the timeliness of responses to alerts this has improved slightly from the year before although this will continue to require attention over the next year. The total number of alerts responded to within the 10 working day timescale was 51.1%. If however they are not responded to within the timescale this will automatically be progressed to Stage 1 for the service manager to consider and address. There are occasions where the IRO does not always use the dispute resolution process and will seek to speak with the social worker and manager after a review. Whilst this invariably results in the desired outcome for the child, this cannot be captured for reporting purposes.
- 8.6 If deemed appropriate, IROs will also note concerns with external partners by raising with the individual concerned and following up in writing. However,

there are only two recorded instances of this happening during the year – one in respect of a young person not having consistent contact with family whilst in Young Offenders Institution and the other was the absence of a Health Visitor who had first hand information that was relevant to the child at the review. Both of these resulted in positive actions being taken.

9 Participation and views of children

- 9.1 Of the 2382 children subject to LAC reviews during this year, 1904 were 4 years old or more. Nearly half of these children and young people are recorded as having attended reviews. Of the remainder, 47.3% are recorded as having their views known to the review. Throughout the year, there were only 62 occasions when it was recorded that a child's views had not been known to the review which is an improvement from the previous year. Where views are not evidenced at the review, the Independent Reviewing Officers will endeavour to gain the views of the young person.
- 9.2 IROs have been provided with 'business cards' to give to young people to help enable the young person to contact the IRO should they wish to do so. IROs have increasingly made efforts to maintain contact with children outside of the review meeting, with a particular emphasis on, for example, vulnerable children subject to sexual exploitation, those who go missing and pose a significant challenge.

The following are examples of positive outcomes from IROs making contact:

- *Case A- School expressed concern about young person's presentation as they were not opening up to anyone. Their social worker had just been allocated so the IRO visits and the young person disclosed emotional abuse occurring within the placement. IRO then contacts social worker immediately and young person is placed elsewhere*
 - *Case B- Young person was working towards living in a semi-independent placement but felt he was being given too many boundaries. IRO visits and listens to young person's views and his agreed package of care changes as a result. Now the young person is much happier and has more trust in the local authority.*
- 9.3 The group of young people least likely to participate in their review are teenagers. IROs continue to consider creative ways in exploring how to communicate with those who do not attend or present their views for the review. Further investigation into potential use of information technology will be prioritised for the coming year.

10 Service User Feedback

Children and young people

- 10.1 During June and November 2014, two questionnaires were provided to children/young people aged 9 years and over, 51% responded in June.

Although a smaller sample was sought in November, there was a higher return from those who did not attend their review. The outcome of both initiatives was very encouraging and a high number of young people reported satisfaction around their participation with 88% feeling involved and 96% listened to. 100% of young people reported important things were talked about and 95% agreed with the decisions made at the review. In terms of invitations to the review 85% of young people knew who was coming and felt in control of this. One area was identified where improvement was needed and that was in relation to the young person being provided with a 'Listen to me booklet' before the review as this was not always provided consistently. In some instances, IROs have assisted those young people who wanted to complete this before the review. Of those young people who did not want to attend their review they spoke with the IRO when they visited or conveyed their views through their carers or social worker. The Children in Care Council gave positive feedback about the questionnaire stating they found it simple and easy to use, minor changes were made based on their feedback. Collating the views of children on a regular basis will be given further attention, again including the use of technology in this respect.

10.2 Comments made by some young people:

- *Spoke to IRO in placement and then before the review*
- *IRO explained what would happen and I understood*
- *I had been given chance at all times to say what I wanted to and needed to say and explain.*
- *My future plans for another placement*
- *My review went well, I liked everything it was very good*
- *I enjoyed being at the review*

Professionals and carers

10.3 A similar exercise was undertaken with professionals and carers during October 2014. Out of 203 reviews that took place, 365 feedback forms were returned. It is very positive that 96% of those that responded felt welcomed by the IRO and the vast majority, 99%, reported that they were given the time to share their information, convey their views and opinions about the young person and felt respected by the IRO. Also 97% of responders noted they left the meeting having a clear understanding of the care plan for the child/young person. The only area requiring attention was the need to increase the number of attendees receiving minutes of the last meeting, this related to parents and carers receiving minutes in a timelier manner. During this year there has only been one complaint received by a parent regarding a review going ahead without her attendance, following some miscommunication as to whether the review would take place due to the wintry weather.

10.4 The Service managers for the ICS continue to observe chairs undertaking meetings twice a year and feedback is sought from professionals and carers as part of this exercise. The feedback is provided to the IRO immediately after an observation and if any areas of development are identified then this is addressed. The managers continue to seek and learn from service user

feedback and in particular further work is being undertaken to seek a way to gain views of 5-9 year old looked after children.

11 Feedback from audits

- 11.1 The social care audit tool includes the requirement for the auditor to make comments regarding whether reviews are effective, regular and demonstrate robust scrutiny and challenge of plans. The following are some of the comments noted within the findings from LAC file audits which were included in the Children's Social Care Quality Management Framework report for quarter 3 of 2014/2015.
- *The quality of the plans was good, with clear actions identified. The plan led to a good outcome for Child A.*
 - *Reviews are effective and regular. Child B participates fully and co-chairs her reviews. The previous review had challenged the lack of planning and has been revisited at this review and concluded as positive.*
 - *The quality of planning has been positive for Child C. His reviews have been held regularly and Child C has largely participated in the review meetings.*
 - *The IRO has been very proactive in this case progressing actions relating to contact and permanency. This has had a positive impact on Child D. Noting the LAC review decisions are concise and clear.*

12 Permanence Panel

- 12.1 The permanence panel was introduced in March 2014 and its purpose is to scrutinise and provide support to children under the age of 15 who are not being adopted and require permanence in the way of long term fostering or special guardianship orders. The panel considers 5-8 cases per month with the focus of the panel being to ensure stability for the child and ensure the right supports are in place. Although the panel provides scrutiny and support for permanence plans, decision making remains within the LAC Review process. If the panel does not feel the care plan meets the child's needs then this will be escalated to the relevant Service Manager and if this does not get resolved then it will be escalated to the Group Managers – Safeguarding and Independent Review and Social Work Services – and ultimately to the Service Director for Children's Social Care for decision. Of all the cases considered by the panel over the year no cases have been escalated. One of the service managers for the ICS sits on this panel which enables them to consider the involvement of the IRO and provide feedback from the panel about the IROs involvement and the quality of the minutes submitted.

13 Key Findings

- The LAC population has remained stable throughout the year and IROs are increasingly fulfilling the wider expectations of their role
- There are good examples of child centred challenges made by IROs to promote good outcomes

- There has been positive feedback from service users
- IROs have taken part in regional events to promote professional development and effectiveness.
- There has been ongoing liaison with key partners involved with looked after children

14 Areas for Development 2015 – 16

- IROs to help promote recognition of achievements of LAC by use of a recently developed 'celebration card' approved by the Children in Care Council - No Labels Group.
- Explore further how the service can obtain the views of children aged 5-9 years.
- Ensure that any relevant issues for partner organisations are effectively raised and recorded.
- Seek views of children and young people having a LAC review at the time where cases have been identified as part of the social care audit process, in order that their views can be included within the audit findings
- IROs to explore different means of communicating with children and young people between reviews or as part of the review by promoting child-centred planning.

11.05.15

Izzy Martin and Suzie Morris

Service Managers

Independent Chair Service

Safeguarding and Independent Review

Appendix A – Key Areas for Development 2014-15

ACTION	COMMENTARY
Complete questionnaire with children and young people to ascertain their views about service they receive from the IROs.	Achieved.
Liaise with No Labels group to review the questionnaire and see if a similar one can be devised for 5-9 year olds.	Ongoing.
Invite more young people to chair their meetings	Achieved - although an ongoing process.
Strengthen and develop other methods of contact between IRO and young person between reviews	Achieved - although an ongoing process.
Continue to meet with CAFCASS	Achieved.
Strengthen the involvement of IROs with their lead roles	Achieved - although an ongoing process.
Service Managers of ICS continue to observe IROs chairing reviews and seek feedback from carers, young people and professionals	Achieved and ongoing.