

NOTTINGHAMSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL Annual Report of Independent Reviewing Officer [IRO] Service

April 2013 – March 2014

Independent Chair Service vision statement (June 2012)

“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

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 a child protection plan, 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 for development and highlighting good practice.

There are 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 will be 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 scrutiny by members of the Corporate Parenting Board. This report will also be available as a public document on the County Council's website.

This report will;

- describe activities undertaken in order to improve our service to children and young people in Nottinghamshire
- consider how well we are doing
- identify areas for development for the service in the coming year

Progress against actions identified in last year's annual report will be addressed in the body of this report but are also detailed in **Appendix A**.

2. The role of the IRO

Independent Reviewing Officers were introduced across England and Wales to represent the interests of looked after children. Statutory guidance (The IRO Handbook) was introduced in April 2011.

The role of an IRO is to ensure the child's care plan fully reflects the child's needs, and that their wishes and feelings are sought. The IRO also has a duty to monitor the local authority's

performance and to challenge any poor practice in the care planning process. If the IRO is unable to agree the plan for the child or young person then they can refer their concerns to the Children and Family Court Advisory Service (CAFCASS).

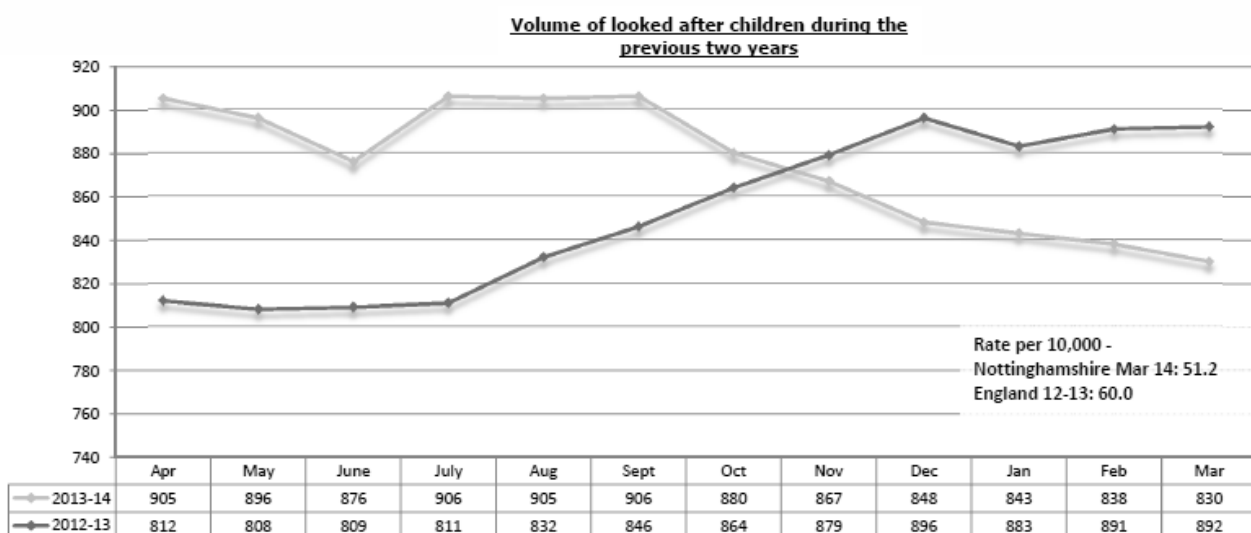
The IRO is responsible for making sure the child has access to an advocate and understands how they can support them during the review meeting. IROs have been identified to take a lead role in specific areas, for example looked after children with disabilities and those who have involvement with mental health services, in order to promote expertise and good practice in those areas.

3. Structure of the service

Over the past year there has been continued focus to increase the number of permanent staff within the service. There are currently 13.1 IROs; 10.5 FTE are permanent staff and 2.6 FTE are agency. Due to the increased LAC population over the last few years, it had been necessary to increase the number of IROs. However, during 2013-14, LAC numbers have stabilised in Nottinghamshire which has enabled the service to meet demands and expectations within current capacity.

On 31st March 2013, there were 892 Looked after Children in Nottinghamshire. The total number of LAC reviews chaired by IROs between April 2013 and March 2014 was 2,722, with 95% (2,579) being held within timescale.

As can be seen from the chart below, there was a notable increase in the number of LAC from July to December 2012, with numbers stabilising from January to September 2013. LAC numbers have then been decreasing in the period October 2013 to March 2014.



It has been noted by the IROs that there has been a significant increase in the number of children and young people who have been made subject to guardianship orders to former foster carers. During 2012-2013, 8.4% of children left care due to a Special Guardianship Order (SGO) being made, compared to 15.9% in 2013-2014.

The work undertaken by IROs is supported by a team of Business Support staff who complete some of the review minutes for the IROs. They also assist in distributing the minutes in a timely way. Consideration is being given to the use of electronic devices to aid and increase the efficiency of minute taking within the service as a whole.

The Service Managers observe IROs in reviews to promote consistency and individual development; and feedback sought from agencies as part of this process has been positive about the chairing skills of the Nottinghamshire IROs.

4. Key functions of IROs

The IRO role is pivotal in making sure permanency plans are in place for each Looked after Child and that adoption is being progressed as quickly as possible where applicable. A review for a Looked after Child forms part of a continuing planning process for that child, and is held to make plans to safeguard and promote the child's welfare.

In most cases where a child who is the subject of a child protection plan becomes looked after they will no longer need to remain on a child protection plan. IROs liaise regularly with the Child Protection Coordinators to ensure children and young people are only subject to one planning and review process. At the end of March 2014, 12 children were recorded as 'dual status' i.e. being both looked after and subject to a child protection plan.

IROs recognise that some children and young people are particularly vulnerable. These include those who live outside the local authority area, those who go missing and those at risk of sexual exploitation. IROs therefore take extra care in understanding the risks posed to these children. They track what is happening with these cases, and make sure the social worker and involved agencies are adhering to required expectations of visits and meetings to ensure these children and young people are not further disadvantaged by a delay in response to their needs. The IROs recognise their role in ensuring these children and young people are placed in the most appropriate placement to meet their needs. IROs also promote positive and effective contact with agencies and family.

As part of their quality assurance role, IROs gather information and offer feedback in respect of the involvement and contribution of social care and external organisations. Where there are significant concerns relating to practice or drift, the IRO will initiate an alert to the social care team manager or raise the practice issue with the relevant external organisation. During 2013-2014, a total of 190 alerts were raised. This is a significant increase over the previous two years and evidences that the IROs are being more robust in challenging the local authority where appropriate about concerns relating to practice, including any delay in progressing recommendations.

The following were the key themes noted with regard to the alerts processed:

- incomplete assessments causing delay in decisions about planning
- permanence options for young person not fully explored
- pathway plan not completed fully
- delay in requesting initial LAC Review when child placed in a Regulation 24 placement with family
- delay in making application for court proceedings to be initiated to secure permanence for children
- lack of preparation for young person leaving care
- absence of appropriate paperwork; Personal Education Plan, health assessment and essential information

More recently the service also introduced a system for raising practice issues with external organisations where there are concerns about their contribution to the needs identified in the child or young person's plan.

In conjunction with the virtual head two such issues have been raised relating to education matters. These were both related to the young persons' access to appropriate education and both were resolved satisfactorily. The use of the dispute resolution process with external organisations and within the Local Authority has been strengthened with greater Service Manager oversight and a robust system put into place to track and monitor responses in a timely way.

It is important to note that IROs also feedback on positive practice to social workers and other organisations in respect of the work undertaken with looked after children, for example positive direct work with young people.

Independent legal advice can be accessed by IROs when required in relation to issues around care plans. This has been formalised in the last year and has been accessed on one occasion, resulting in a clear view on whether a young person who was in receipt of short breaks was eligible for a leaving Care Service.

Following a LAC review, IROs input information onto the child's electronic record which provides information about a number of tasks in relation to the LAC process. Notable information includes:

- Was the LAC report received 3 days before LAC review?
- Have all the appropriate agencies been invited/ consulted with?
- Was the child/young person seen alone by the IRO?
- Was the child/young person consulted with by the IRO prior to the review meeting?
- Has the "Listen to me" document been completed?
- Was the young person consulted about the venue?
- Was the young person asked who they would like to attend the review?
- Did the child/young person attend their review and how were their views obtained?

Key themes identified from the data recorded include:

- There has been some improvement in LAC review reports being received prior to the review. The vast majority of LAC review processes involve all relevant people.
- IROs make every effort to see the child/young person alone, however young people sometimes decline to meet. The wishes and feelings of children and young people are sought through “Listen to me “ documents, visits, telephone contact, letters, interactive play, pictures and through the use of advocacy. If the child/young person attends the review then the IRO will consult with them prior to the meeting starting.
- The IRO will make every effort to hold the meeting at the venue of the child/young person’s choice, but this is not always achievable.
- The IRO will consult with the young person about whom they want to attend their review once they have established a good working relationship with them.

A detailed report will be provided with this information for social care teams external organisations to comment on good practice within the next 6 months.

5. Participation and engagement of children and young people

Young people’s engagement in the review process

During the year a ‘Signs and Symbols’ leaflet has been developed for 0-18 year olds. This work involved young people from the Children in Care Council, service providers, specialist schools and two IROs with specialist knowledge of working with children with disabilities. This has now been finalised and is now being printed.

The following are examples of how IROs have helped to engage young people in their reviews:

- A 17 year old young person co-chaired their own review. This worked well as she has attended her reviews since she came into care when she was 12 and she has ongoing support from Children in Care Council of which she is a member. The IRO was impressed as the young person took control of her own care planning whilst discussing current achievements and what she intended to do in the future once she had left care.
- A sibling group of three girls ranging from 7 to 12 years of age chose not to attend the review meeting, but the IRO visited them in their foster home to see them alone and they also completed the Listen To Me document for the review.
- A 12 year old young person who is deaf and has complex emotional needs was visited by his IRO both at school and foster home to gain a better view of his current situation and needs. His foster carer and teacher provided sign language support. For future visits the IRO will be seeking an independent sign language worker to accompany them.
- An 11 year old young person completed a Listen to Me leaflet, spoke with his IRO prior to his LAC review and fully participated in the meeting. He has a very positive view about how being in care has helped him and is making good progress.

There are some excellent examples of engagement with children and young people by their social worker and in particular the methods used by residential units to convey young people's wishes and feelings have been noted as positive practice by IROs.

The information provided has been of great value and provides a story about the child or young person's progress and achievements in school and where they live.

Children with complex communication needs are provided with an IRO who has developed skills and has specialist knowledge in working with children with disabilities. IROs strongly advocate for these children, and use more creative ways to allow them to express their wishes and feelings and participate in their plan.

Young People's achievements

IROs embrace the achievements of children through LAC reviews. The following are some examples:

- As a consequence of early life experiences, two young people were lacking in confidence and self-esteem. Both have thrived in their foster placement, took up street dancing classes and have performed at numerous venues. One of them has a passion for computers and is studying with the view to get into forensic technology.
- A young person attended a celebration event at County Hall in November 2013; they invited numerous adults who were involved in their life including their IRO. The young person was interviewed along with others by the local press and undertook a presentation. It was a proud occasion to see all the people involved with the young person offering her support at this event.
- A 13 year old recently took part in the National Roller Hockey competition and reached the semi-final in which she received a bronze medal. The young person also played for the women's team where she reached the final and won the cup. Given these achievements the young person is due to go to the Youth Olympics in Las Vegas in July this year to compete in roller hockey.

How the IROs have advocated on behalf of young people;

IROs are now attending the 'No Labels' Children in Care Council meeting where they seek to help a group of looked after children and young people express their views as to how services could be improved and strengthened. These views are then shared with the rest of the IRO team so that all have a clear understanding about any particular issues that need addressing either during reviews or when IROs are in contact with children and young people between reviews.

In one specific example, a placement was at the risk of breaking down and the IRO negotiated a planned period of respite with the support of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) so that the placement continued as it was in the best interests of the young person. The young person remained in placement and is planning to leave care later this year.

6. Key areas for further development for 2014-2015

- More work will take place aimed at gaining the views from children and young people over the age of 9 years regarding the service they receive from the IROs.
- Additional specific work, in conjunction with the No Labels group, (the Children in Care Council) will take place to engage with younger children (aged 5-9). Work with the No Labels group is planned to explore other creative ways of involving children and young people in their reviews and to consider the possibility of how the record of a LAC review can be produced in a more child-friendly way.
- The contact between the IRO and young person between formal reviews is to be strengthened and developed.
- An evaluation of the effectiveness of the dispute resolution process is to be undertaken in order to further demonstrate the impact on improved outcomes for Looked after Children.
- Further feedback to be sought on the IRO service from carers and professionals to identify further opportunities for improvement.

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