

Appendix 1

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

April 2012 – March 2013

Independent Chair Service vision statement created in 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

This is an annual report of the Nottinghamshire Independent Chair Service (ICS), focussing on the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) in promoting good outcomes for Looked After Children. 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. It is planned that this report will be available as a public document via the County Council’s website.

This report will:

- § Highlight areas of good practice and areas which require improvement; identifying emerging themes and trends.
- § Describe areas of work which the service has prioritised during the year.
- § Areas of work which the service will prioritise in the coming year.

2. Context

The responsibility of local authorities is to provide Looked After Children the best experiences in life as possible and actively promote a wide range of opportunities to develop their talents and skills by acting as a ‘corporate parent’ alongside birth parents whenever possible. The role of the corporate parent is to act as the best possible parent for each child they look after and to advocate on his/her behalf to secure the best possible outcomes.

The Children Act 1989 [amended 2004] and the Care Planning Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010 specify the duties of the local authority to appoint an IRO when a child first becomes looked after. The IRO should ensure that the local authority gives due consideration to any views expressed by the child and the IRO has a responsibility to monitor the local authority’s performance of its functions in relation to the child’s case. The Regulations clearly specify circumstances when the local authority should consult with the IRO, for example, proposed change of placement, change of education plan, or serious incident. They also specify the actions that the IRO must take if it is felt that the local authority is failing to comply with the Regulations or is in breach of its duties to the child. Ultimately that could lead to making a referral to CAFCASS. The IRO should also seek to speak with a child prior to a review and enable their contribution to their meeting.

3. LAC Strategy

During 2012/13, Nottinghamshire County Council developed a strategy for looked after children in response to the Government refocusing its approach in supporting children in care with more emphasis on preventative and early intervention techniques following the recommendations of the Munro Review. The strategy forms part of Nottinghamshire's response to the changing national context regarding looked after children with a focus on promoting more effective care planning. The Children's Rights Director for England recently published the Care Monitor 2011 which provides a comprehensive picture of children's views of the care system and the challenges within it. As part of our local strategy, NCC and its partner agencies developed the Pledge in consultation with two hundred looked after children who stated how their experience within the care system could be improved. The Pledge reinforces the role of the IRO in seeking a child's views and giving them the opportunity to state these before the review or by ensuring completion of the revised 'Listen to Me' document, which covers a number of areas about the child's experiences in care.

4. The IRO Service

The group of IROs are all experienced practitioners/managers with a wealth of experience in working with looked after children. At the end of the year, there were 11 full time equivalent IROs – being a combination of permanent staff and agency staff whilst recruitment activity has continued. Two permanent IROs have specialist knowledge of working with children with disabilities which has assisted in ensuring relevant packages of care are in place.

From March 2013 an additional investment of 3 IROs has been secured to reflect the increase, and the projected continued increase, in the number of looked after children. By the end of March 2013 there were 892 looked after children but additionally there are approximately 50 children with disabilities receiving short breaks who require an IRO to chair their reviews given the number of nights they are away from home. The IRO Handbook indicates that IROs should have a caseload of 50-70 in order that they are able to complete all the core functions of their role. Caseloads for IROs have been higher than this over the year but the additional investment will have a beneficial impact in this regard.

The IROs are supported by a group of Business Support staff who have had their own challenges over the past year with vacancies and the need to employ temporary staff to meet the demands of the growing LAC figures. IROs generally type their own records of the LAC Reviews but a small number are minuted by the Business Support team, e.g. where it is a particularly complex case or a meeting is covering the reviews of three or more children. One IRO explored the use of a 'tough book' but due to connection problems this did not prove to be successful. Consideration is being given to the use of other electronic devices to aid and increase the efficiency of taking minutes within the service as a whole.

The production and distribution of minutes in a timely way has continued to be a challenge for the service and has received considerable managerial attention to remedy this. However, the IROs do ensure that the recommendations from the

meetings are distributed to the team manager within 5 working days of the review, in accordance with the IRO Handbook, in order to check that the manager is in agreement with the actions identified.

5. Independent Chair Service review

During 2012/13, the Independent Chair Service undertook a review of its service with a particular focus on promoting the effectiveness of the quality assurance aspect of the IRO. This involved establishing the strengths and challenges of the service, benchmarking against other local authority areas and producing an action plan. As part of this action plan, the Independent Chair Service developed a vision to express its core values and outline what the service is aiming to achieve. There were three areas identified in which the service wished to focus on to strengthen the quality assurance role of the IRO. These were:

- *To evaluate and audit the practice of the chairs consistently.*
- *Create a visible, transparent, consistent professional service where everyone is clear about its purpose in respect of children.*
- *Create child centred meetings ensuring meaningful participation of young people and their parents/carers.*

During 2012/2013 the service managers sought feedback from agencies and parents about the service they received from the IROs by the service managers requesting completion of a questionnaire as part of their observation of the IRO in practice. The following positive themes were noted:

- Practice was child focussed.
- There was evidence of challenge from the IRO.
- The chair enabled participation by all attendees.
- Previous recommendations were reviewed and progress of plans tracked.
- There was evidence of challenge when previous recommendations were not completed.
- Young people's views for LAC meeting were sought through the chair seeing them before the meeting or by referring to the 'Listen to Me' document at the review.
- Evidence of Chair recording when and how child should be informed of the outcome of the meeting if they were not present

Additionally, during February 2013, there was a further survey of parents/carers who were in attendance at LAC reviews during that month.

A total of 168 reviews were undertaken during the period, of these there were 17 (10%) where the Parent / Carer declined to respond and 80 (47%) where there were no Parents / Carers in attendance. Therefore, there were 71 questionnaires completed and from the information collated it is quite promising. The overall key messages were that the parents and carers felt comfortable and welcome, they understood what was discussed and felt they were given the opportunity to speak and ask questions at the meeting. Most parents felt that their views and wishes were listened to and considered.

From the information gathered, we identified two areas for further improvement which involves a more consistent approach to the chair speaking with the parent before the meeting and making parents aware of the complaints procedure if they are not happy with the service provided. All the IROs are aware of this and this is being positively addressed.

6. Participation of young people

During the year there have been revisions made to the 5-11 yr olds and the 11-18 yr olds 'Listen to Me' leaflet which involved some young people from the Children in Care Council. Subsequently further work has been undertaken involving young people to complete a Signs and Symbols translation of the leaflet for children with disabilities. The final version is in process and once agreed will be printed and then circulated. A further piece of work is being commissioned to work alongside Yeoman Park school to devise symbols for young people to answer the questions in the Signs and Symbols 'Listen to Me' document, the aim is to complete this work by the end of the summer.

The following are examples of the efforts made by IROs to include young people in their reviews:

Child 1

During her 8 years in care, this young person had a number of different workers which at times she experienced as not being very helpful as there was no consistency. However she spoke positively of her IRO who she said she considered to be the most reliable adult in her life and had an understanding of the difficulties and challenges she experienced in care. At her recent leaving care review she reflected on her care experience and recognised her behaviour had not always been helpful. Both the young person and the IRO jointly chaired the leaving care review and she was able to demonstrate how mature and confident she had become.

Child 2

A 17 year old young person who has anxieties related to his autism and learning disability has not been willing to engage with his reviews. The IRO and transitions worker met with the young person well before the date of his review and with the aid of Makaton symbols and signs they were able to establish his wishes and feelings. The young person fully engaged and completed a large map with his views on and this will be the central point for discussion when his review takes place over the coming weeks.

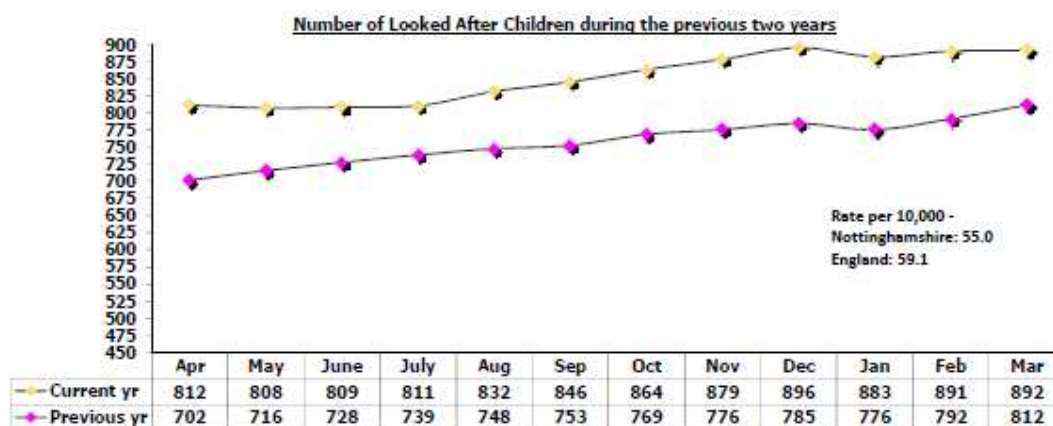
Child 3

An 11 year old young person will not attend his review but he regularly sends a typed letter to the IRO about his views about being looked after and very recently sent a commentary on a UB stick to the IRO. The IRO made sure the young person's comments were then fed into the LAC review.

These are just a few examples and there are many other creative ways the IRO undertakes to engage the children and young people they work with.

7. Children Looked After

At 31st March 2013, there were 892 children and young people looked after. As can be seen from the below chart, there was a notable increase in numbers from July 2012 to December 2012 but with relatively stability from January to March 2013.



At the end of March 2013, 666 (74.7%) of LAC were placed in foster care.

During the year, 76 children had been placed for adoption whilst 69% children were adopted who were placed for adoption within 12 months of the agency deciding that the child should be placed for adoption.

The total number of LAC reviews held within timescale for the year was 96.8%- 2,629 reviews took place with 2,544 being completed within timescale. This was slightly below the target figure of 98% but shows a significant improvement from the year before which was 85% and is set against the increased numbers of looked after children.

On the occasions when a child who is subject to a child protection plan becomes looked after, the child protection plan is reviewed at the earliest possible opportunity. During the year attention was given to this being undertaken in a timely way – to make certain that children would only be subject to one review process. At the end of March 2013, 18 children were recorded as dual status: 5 of whom had been dual status for 3 months or more. This is a positive reduction from the start of the reporting year (31). IROs will continue to work closely with operational staff from the children's social work teams and Child Protection Coordinators to maintain low numbers of children subject to dual processes.

8. Qualitative information

During July 2012, an IRO management information form was developed to record information relating to a child and their review as follows:

- Have the statutory visits been completed in timescale?
- Has the "Listen to Me Document" been completed?
- Were the reports received three days before the review and what is the quality?

- Have the care plan and pathway plan been completed and shared with the child and other interested parties?
- Was the report and care plan discussed with the young person before the review?
- Have all the appropriate agencies been invited and consulted with?
- Has the review resulted in an alert being sent?
- Did the social worker, supervising social worker and child/young person attend the review?

Findings from these reports noted the following themes:

- Good practice and liaison from the staff in the social care Permanence teams
- Individual and creative examples of good practice and Care Planning from the Children with Disabilities Service
- A consistent focus/understanding of reviews being held within timescale.
- Some parents/carers and young people are not seeing the social worker's report before the review. This can result in delays at the start of reviews as reports are read and queries are often raised particularly in more contentious reviews within proceedings.
- Changes of social workers have been positive in some cases.
- Examples of workers doing creative and skilled work with children in the Permanence, Court and some District Child Protection teams.
- Standards of reports vary - some are very detailed whilst others lack information required to progress the child's plan and/or recommendations not being fulfilled from the previous review.
- Transfer of cases and changes in staffing has had an impact on the progression of some plans

During the year, the service managers have reported to the social care operational management team on the key issues arising and feedback to other agencies has begun to be strengthened.

9. Dispute Resolution Process

Where there are significant concerns relating to practice and drift, the IRO will initiate an alert and send it to the team manager for their attention.

During 2012-2013, a total of 148 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. Following the introduction of the new operating model for children's social care, there are dedicated teams working with the majority of looked after children. This will provide an opportunity for there to be enhanced practice in working with looked after children and a strong and productive working relationship with the IRO service.

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

- Paperwork for the review not being submitted in a timely way.

- Assessments outstanding.
- Pathway plan not fully completed
- Social Work visits not within timescale.
- LPM meeting to be considered.
- Contact arrangements to be clarified
- Need to ensure young person's views obtained
- Impact on case progression of change of worker
- LAC risk assessment required
- Need for life story work to be completed

Normally the issues raised by an alert are resolved at an early stage but there would be escalation to a service manager level if need be.

It is also important to note that IROs also inform managers of examples of good practice.

10. Key areas for further development for 2013/2014

- Complete a questionnaire with children and young people to ascertain their views about the service they receive from the IROs and respond to any areas where improvements are required.
- Complete and disseminate the Signs and Symbols 'Listen to Me' leaflet
- Linking identified IROs with the Children in Care Council
- Ensure children and young people have sight of their care plan prior to the review
- As far as possible promote reviews being held at venue of choice of young person
- Explore further the use of ICT in helping convey a young person's views
- Exploring further the opportunities for a young person to be involved in chairing their review
- IROs to be involved in a Mobile Technology project to promote efficiency
- Ensure that the level of IRO caseloads enables the exercising of their quality assurance role adequately.
- Link IROs with specific social work teams to promote quality feedback regarding key issues and exchange of information
- Strengthen the links with the Family Justice Board and CAFCASS in order to promote the role of the IRO.
- Improve the quality of LAC review minutes to ensure they are outcome focussed and expressed within a SMART framework.

Izzy Martin/ Hilary Turner
Service Managers
Independent Chair service
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