



From Strength to Strength

**NOTTINGHAMSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL**  
**Annual Report of Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Service**  
**April 2022 – March 2023**

## **Purpose of the Report**

1. This is an annual report written for the Safeguarding Assurance and Information Group and the lead member for Children and Young People. It provides an outline of the progress and challenges of the work being undertaken by the Local Authority and relevant partner organisations regarding children being looked after in Nottinghamshire after during the last year (April 2022-March 2023) and the commitments for the following 12 months.

2. I am a Service Manager with responsibility for the Independent Chair Service. The Independent Chair Service is part of the Strategic Safeguarding and Independent Review Service, it is positioned in the Commissioning and Resources Division to provide a level of independence from the social work teams who sit within the Children in need of Help, Care and Protection Division. The Independent Chair Service is responsible for quality assuring practice in relation to children in public care and children subject to child protection and safeguarding plans. It ensures that appropriate care and safeguarding plans are in place for these children and promotes effective interagency working. There are two groups of staff within the Independent Chair Service and this report will focus on the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO). A separate report is available in respect of the Child Protection Coordinator part of the service.

3. The responsibility of the IRO is the management of the review process to a wider overview of the case including regular monitoring and follow-up between reviews. The IRO ensures the child's current wishes and feelings are given full consideration and where necessary challenges where the child's care plan has not been acted upon or progressed in a timely way. They are responsible for chairing care plan reviews at regular statutory intervals. It is not the responsibility of the IRO to manage the case, supervise the social worker or devise the care plan. However, it is important for the IRO to develop a consistent relationship with the child. The IRO's role in essence is to ensure that Nottinghamshire County Council acts as a responsible corporate parent on an individual basis and provides good standards of care and services to the children they care for.

## **Our vision**

*The Independent Chair Service promotes best outcomes for children through support, review, and challenge. We will deliver this commitment by providing a strength based Independent Chair Service that will promote best outcomes for*

children and young people by working with them, their families, carers, and professionals to ensure they are kept safe and achieve their potential.

## **How we work and what we do**

3. Since 2004 all Local Authorities have been required to appoint Independent Reviewing Officers under S118 of the Adoption Act 2002, to protect children's interests throughout the care planning process.

4. The Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) service is set within the framework of the updated IRO Handbook, 2010 linked to the revised Care Planning Regulations and Guidance which were introduced in April 2011 (amended 2015).

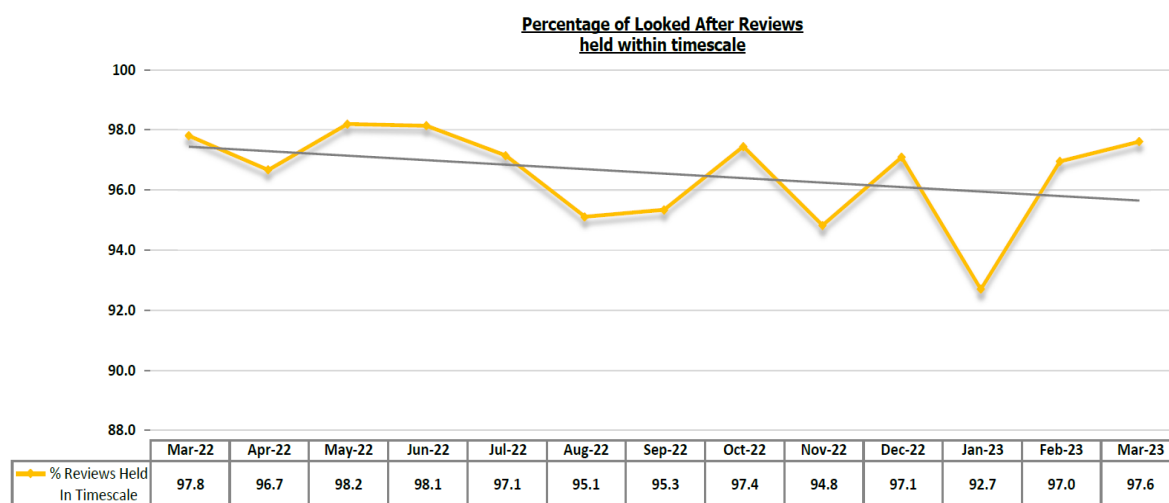
5. The IRO's role in essence is to ensure that Nottinghamshire County Council on an individual child basis acts as a responsible corporate parent and provides good standards of care and services to the children they care for.

6. Lead roles are shared out between the IROs to cover the areas of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE), Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE), and Harmful Sexual Behaviour (HSB). The IROs meet with respective Child Protection Coordinators (CPCs) for these areas so consistency is created between the two in ensuring local procedures and policy are being followed and providing advice to social work teams where needed.

7. IROs provide quality assurance on social work practice. Feedback is provided directly to the team manager after each individual review. On a quarterly basis a summary report is provided to children's services managers which identifies key themes and analysis of the data collated. The Service Managers for the social work teams and the independent chair service work together to develop action plans from this information to improve practice. IROs attend social work team meetings throughout the year to discuss feedback (two way) directly with staff and share information about service updates. IROs provide feedback about social workers identifying areas of good practice and any positive comments made by a child, family or partners about work undertaken.

8. IROs have a role in presenting social care teams and external agencies with appropriate constructive challenge where required, to address issues if children are not being safeguarded effectively and/or there is drift or delay in progressing interventions/assessments to meet identified needs. Currently this is achieved through the established concerns resolution and escalation processes. In addition, all IROs have an auditing role and complete regular audits throughout the year in line with the Service Improvement Team requirements.

## Children looked after during the past year



Over the past year 2,409 reviews were held and of these 96.5% were held within timescale which is within the current target of 90%.

## Reflecting on our Achievements and the Impact of this Progress

Last year we identified the following as our key priorities:

9. To implement a quality assurance framework within the service including practice observations, regular peer audit of the chair's role, reflective group supervision and individual professional development.

The service has implemented a quality assurance framework which includes practice observations of chairs by managers and peer audits have also been undertaken.

The audit work identified a need to increase the visibility of the IROs footprint on a child's records and this is an area of practice we have been developing as a service.

Reflective group supervision sessions continue with chairs reflecting on the impact of their practice for children and young people they work with. This allows chairs to share their own experiences with new members of staff to develop skills and knowledge.

10. To improve the quality of the data and feedback provided to our social work colleagues with a focus on how this is used to improve practice and outcomes for children and families.

The service has continued to develop the report provided to social work teams and the quality of the action plans that focus on practice improvement. In the following twelve months we will focus on evidencing the impact of these action plans

11. To fully embed strength-based and restorative model of practice into our work with looked after children.

Together with the social work teams a group of IROs worked together to create a strengths-based agenda and this is now fully implemented for initial and review meetings. Feedback was sought from a group of young people and the Children in Care Council, and it was received well.

12. Actively support more children and people to access independent visitors and advocates.

This is spoken about in all reviews, but we need to have clear data around how many children access these services. This needs to continue to be a focus for the forthcoming year.

To embed practice where IROs speak to all children and young people at least once between reviews and two weeks prior to the review to ensure they are fully prepared and can participate.

13. To receive feedback from children/young people about their reviews.

IROs have continued to encourage young people at their reviews to access independent advocates and use the Mind of my Own app. This needs to go further and over the next 12 months a departmental feedback form will be created for children and young people to complete at different points of their social work journey.

We have engaged some children and young people for feedback when making changes to our practice such as the agendas for meetings.

14. To hold child focused reviews where the child is empowered to participate, and their voices are heard including child friendly agendas, reports, and minutes.

Face to face meetings for all initial reviews are taking place and then following a conversation with the child or young person arrangements are made for future reviews in line with their requests but with an understanding that if the review is virtual then the IRO will have seen the child or young person face to face.

Reviews are child focused on venues chosen by children and young people and them having a say about who they would like to attend. There are also many examples of young people being supported to chair their own reviews.

15. To embed the concerns resolution process within children's social care and our partners whilst offering high support and challenge to improve outcomes for children.

The concerns resolution process is embedded into practice which encourages high challenge conversations with the child at the centre between the social worker initially to resolve any concerns at stage one of the process.

### **Good news stories of children and young people IROs are responsible for**

S- Young person had the therapy Cat, during covid they were anxious and hardly attended college and consequently had to repeat a year. The young person shared in their post 18 review that they had gained a distinction in their BTEC extended diploma in Creative Media Practice (Film and TV Production)

L-This young person had an amazing year. They got over an injury that left them in bed for months and has gone back to education. They have grown in confidence, they like to go out and try new things, including the leisure centre, going to the library, the youth club, going swimming, and they also been on adventures on trains, trams, and buses. They used an IPAD which has given them a voice.

J, we are very proud of you and the way you have adjusted and managed independent living, J is a very independent and has thrived since living semi-independently. They have had a lot of disruption since becoming a child in our care but has proved themselves since moving into a cluster home, applying for a part time job, changing their name, achieving highly in college exams. J has demonstrated that they have the necessary independence skills and is a very mature, responsible, organised young person. They manage their money well and even opened a savings account. J is a model tenant and is praised for how responsible, mature, and independent they are.

**IROs continue to send emails to celebrate good practice noted from the work undertaken with looked after children with their social workers. Some of these have included the following comments.**

*I wanted to pass on positive feedback for Julie Dean – social worker for C, T and M. Julie is very organised and ensures her reports are written and shared well in advance of reviews and this is such a win for parents. Julie also owns the decisions and recommendations and ensures good progress matters for the children in between reviews. Julie Dean, Looked After Team*

*Parents of a child returned to their care under a Supervision Order said how supported they felt by the social worker who has helped them manage a very difficult time and felt she went over and above in her work and support of them which resulted in a very positive outcome for them and their daughter. (Clare Micklewhaite-court team)*

*SW for MR worked really hard to make sure she has listened to M's views about her rehabilitation home to live with her dad. The SW stayed focussed on the needs of M when her FC was challenging the plan for M to go home. (Charlotte Holdaway-Ashfield)*

*Grandparents caring for their granddaughter with a view for an SGO shared how supportive the social worker has been to them and thanked her for all her hard work. (Suela Hyka- court team)*

*I have been very impressed with the work undertaken by Cheryl Kidby. The children M/EB have now got prospective adopters. Their Father has tried so hard to care for them and loves them very much. He has not been able to pass assessments though due to his mental health and Cannabis use. He is absolutely devastated and Cheryl has worked so sensitively with this asking adopter if they will agree to once yearly face to face. (Cheryl Kidby Permanence team)*

*It was a pleasure to chair A's initial review today. Emily's social worker report was comprehensive and provided clear insight into A's journey and his current circumstance and needs. The report was strength based and there was clear evidence of a good working relationship between S and Emily. This was also evident during today's meeting, and the support Emily provided enabled and empowered S to participate throughout. It was lovely to hear the progress that S is making, and all evidence suggests that she is working with the local authority and in line with the safety plans and agreements in place. It is clear A is thriving in S's care within their current placement. It was a positive meeting and its clear how hard Emily has worked to support the family to progress this plan. (Emily Smith-CP Mansfield)*

*Just wanted to bring to your attention that JC has been great in relation to addressing some concerns around the R case. JC chaired a professional meeting last week and handled some difficult issues in a firm, but polite and sensitive manner. As a result of the meeting, the SSW's have spoken to the foster carers and clarified the LA's expectations with them. We had a great review meeting today and the care plan is progressing in a much better manner. From an IRO perspective, it was helpful to have a proactive team manager championing for better outcomes for children. (JC, CDS)*

*The report for OW was clear and produced well in advance of the meeting and case notes well maintained, which allowed me to prepare and discuss with parents last week. In doing so this meant the review flowed and I was able to be aware of the issues that mum was likely to present with.*

*Laurie's contribution throughout the review was child focused, the information presented professionally and lots of work has been done to promote O's safety and wellbeing. (Laurie Carter, Child Protection Team, Mansfield)*

## **Training and Workforce Development**

16. Independent Reviewing officers have a varied and extensive training offer: both through the County Council training offer and externally. IROs have identified lead

roles within the service and are encouraged to develop their skills and knowledge in the area chosen and share with the rest of the group.

17. They continue to offer support and guidance to frontline workers about their role, they attend team meetings to feedback examples of good practice will provide time to assist teams who may need extra advice about what is required from them when attending a review.

18. IROs attend seminars held regionally and supported by School Development Support Agency SDSA, which involves training sessions being held for IROs within the region and speakers on subjects delivering training. This allows IROs to a share experience with colleagues and to learn from each other. The seminars have been delivered 4 times a year and found to be beneficial.

19. An e-learning programme has been developed explaining the role of the IRO and what is required when attending a review for social workers and external partners.

### **Voice and experiences of children, young people, and their families**

20. The voices of children and young people is a crucial part of the chairs role when preparing for the meeting, it is important the IRO speaks with the child/young person beforehand. In exercising their role, the IRO must ensure the child's current wishes and feelings have been established and considered where appropriate, whilst promoting their voice as part of the process.

	Q1		Q2		Q3		Q4	
PN6 - child does not attend but conveys their feelings to the review	252	45.7%	228	44.9%	297	49.4%	239	46.1%
PN3 - child attends and conveys their views non-verbally	1	0.2%	2	0.4%	0	0%	2	0.4%
PN7 - child does not attend nor conveys their view to the review	35	6.3%	23	4.5%	31	5.2%	29	5.6%
PN1 - child attend and speaks for themselves	225	40.6%	228	44.9%	242	40.3%	220	42.4%
PN5 - child does not attend but asks advocate to speak for them	23	4.2%	22	4.3%	20	3.3%	25	4.8%
PN0 - child under 4 at time of review	108		98		99		98	
29PN4 - child attends; does not speak for	4	0.7%	2	0.4%	0	0%	2	0.4%

themselves / convey their views								
PN2 - child attends and an advocate speaks for them	7	1.3%	2	0.4%	2	0.3%	1	0.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>655</b>		<b>606</b>		<b>669</b>		617	

- From the figures over the past year, it shows the participation figures have shown a similar trend. Children and young people are consulted on how they want their reviews undertaken and many are showing a preference for them to be undertaken virtually.
- Of those who chose not to attend their review, they convey their views to the meeting through other means, with 5% not providing their views, these figures have varied slightly throughout the year but overall shows a positive picture in relation to the participation of children and young people when their reviews take place.

## **Evidence of Challenges and Impact.**

21. The IRO handbook sets out that one of the key functions of the IRO is to resolve problems arising out of the care planning process. Where an IRO has significant concerns about practice or other issues affecting a child's care plan then the IRO can instigate a concern. In the first instance, the IRO will initiate a concern and seek to resolve the concerns with the social worker at stage one of the process. If this is not achievable, then the concern is raised at stage 2 with the team manager. In the situation where it is viewed the child is at risk of significant harm then this would be escalated immediately to the Children's Service Manager and ICS Service Manager. A record of this concern and outcome is placed on the child's file.

22. During this year 79 concerns were raised altogether by IROs under the concerns resolution process with social care practitioners and external partners. 40 were completed at stage 1 with the social worker. The other 39 were progressed to stage 2 with a few onto stage 3. Five of the concerns raised were with external agencies.

- Concerns within social care related to the care plan not being progressed and relevant documentation not being provided for the IRO to view.
- Concerns in relation to partner agencies focused on nonattendance, missing information, and some practice concerns.

23. Overall, the concerns raised were responded to in a timely manner and resolved to the IROs satisfaction

24. A Care Planning Support and Assurance Panel has been established that is chaired by the Group Manager with responsibility for the IROs. This provides an opportunity for social work teams and IROs to bring children to discuss their care plans where there might be particularly difficult issues or requests for support. This



adds a further layer of scrutiny to the care planning process that can be a supportive measure for IROs.

25. In situations where challenge to the Local Authority care plan may be particularly difficult and an agreement cannot be reached the IRO has access to independent legal advice.

### **Our Commitments for the Next 12 Months**

26. We will embed a process where we routinely collect the views of children and young people about their reviews and their IROs that can be translated into data and can inform practice improvement and developments within the service.

27. We will seek to achieve consistent practice within the service including a focus on the IRO footprint on the child's file, visiting frequency, mid-way reviews and practice around face-to-face meetings.

28. We will work with the Service Improvement Team to ensure that learning from quality assurance and the concerns resolution process is evidenced in practice and that it contributes to the departmental practice improvement plan and objectives.

29. We will refine the outputs from reviews so that they are child focused and the IRO has more capacity to build relationships with social work teams, partner agencies and children and young people.

Izzy Martin  
Service Manager  
Strategic Safeguarding and Independent Review  
19.07.23