

**NOTTINGHAMSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL**  
**Annual Report of Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Service**  
April 2017 – March 2018

Independent Chair Service vision statement:

***“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) in Nottinghamshire is part of the Safeguarding and Independent Review Service. The ICS is responsible for quality assuring practice in relation to children in public care and children subject to child protection plans, ensuring that appropriate care/safeguarding plans are in place for these children, and promoting effective interagency working. There are two groups of staff within the ICS and this report will focus on the statutory function of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO). A separate report is available in respect of the Child Protection Coordinator part of the service.

**1.2.** The IRO Handbook, statutory guidance states that the manager of the IRO service is responsible for the production of an annual report for the scrutiny of the members of the Children and Young People’s Committee and for it to be accessible as a public document. This report will provide information and analysis regarding the activity and performance of the IRO service over the past 12 months, and identify areas for development in the coming year. Progress against actions identified in the Annual report 2016-2017 will be addressed in the body of the report.

## **2. Purpose of service and legal context**

**2.1.** The Independent Review Officers’ (IRO) service is set within the framework of the updated IRO Handbook, linked to revised Care Planning Regulations and Guidance which were introduced in April 2011. The responsibility of the IRO has changed from the management of the Review process to a wider overview of the case including regular monitoring and follow-up between Reviews. The IRO has a key role in relation to the improvement of care planning for children Looked After and for challenging drift and delay. The IROs role is to ensure that Nottinghamshire County Council acts as a responsible corporate parent and provides good standards of care and services to the children they care for.

## **3. Staffing/workload**

**3.1.** The establishment for the IRO group is 14 (full time equivalent). The IRO team is part of the Independent Chair Service situated within the Safeguarding, Assurance and

Improvement Service. In October 2017 following restructuring within Nottinghamshire's Children and Families department the Independent Chair Service (ICS) has moved away from the newly formed Youth, Families and Social Work service and is now positioned in the Commissioning and Resources service thus improving greater independence for the service. During 2017 we had one experienced IRO leave the service and they were replaced by a new member of staff. The group is a settled and stable group of staff with a variety of previous experience from different fields in social work which benefits the service as a whole.

**3.2.** Within the IRO Handbook 2010 it states for an IRO to fulfil the overall roles and responsibilities as defined in the Care Planning Regulations a full time IRO should have a caseload consisting of 50-70 children/young people. Caseloads of the IRO group has remained relatively stable with each individual IRO holding cases of 50-70 children, thus within the recommended guidelines (although this can fluctuate in order to develop new staff who have a mentor allocated to them to support them to develop the skills /responsibilities required of the role). In terms of diversity the profile of the service is not the same level as the Looked after population but is representative of a range of gender, age, sexuality, ethnicity and cultural backgrounds. It is important to note due to the stability of the team the IROs are often the person with the longest professional relationship with the child and therefore they are able to recount the child's story and time in care.

**3.3.** The IROs have specialisms/lead roles within the service which enables them to develop specialist knowledge which is shared with colleagues and creates good working networks with other agencies when striving to achieve good outcomes for looked after children. IROs will attend relevant meetings/forums and training sessions related to their lead role. IROs continue to be mindful of children and young people vulnerable to sexual exploitation, who go missing , with disabilities and UASC (unaccompanied asylum seeking children) and other vulnerable children within the looked after population. The lead roles also involve IROs attending meetings/forums, as described below:

**Children Disability Service** - there is one IRO who meets regularly with the CDS managers and discusses areas of concern and priorities for the IRO service. The IRO maintains good communication between the Team Managers and the service to ensure there is consistent practice. The IRO has also attended joint training on DOLS (Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards), in order to understand the roles and responsibilities of all involved and shared this with her own colleagues. The IRO also has links with the transition team and works with the group to ensure timely transition planning for each young person involved.

**CAMHS** - two IROs are linked to this service and workers attended the service meeting last year to discuss what they provide to children and young people it was acknowledged there is limited resources in respect of UASC whom have additional emotional needs due to their experiences of the country they have left because of traumatic situations.

IROs and Foster Carers value the consultation service CAMHS provide and have spoken positively about the support that has been provided when carers have attended the attachment and PACE course.

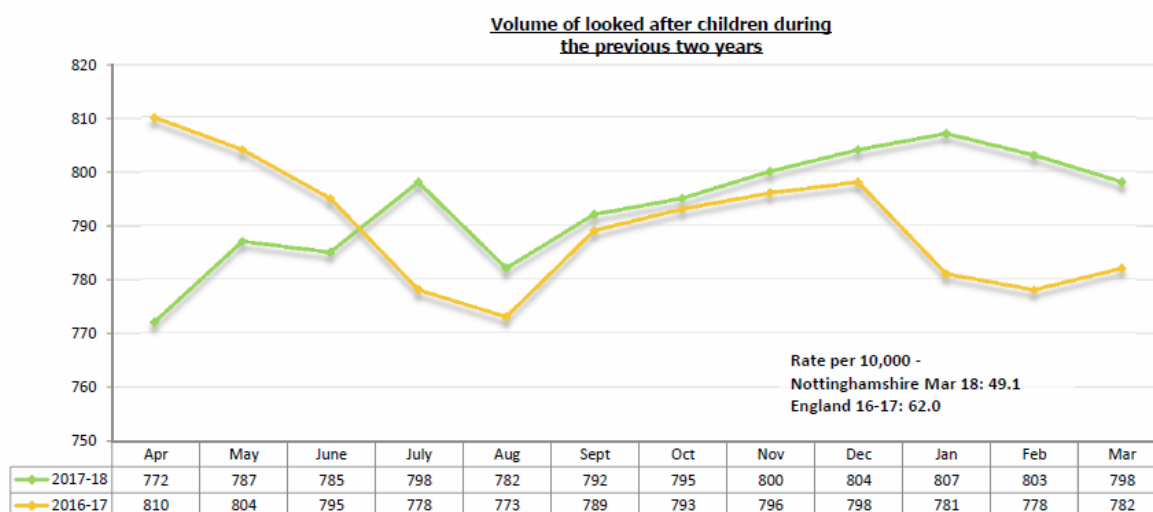
**Adoption** - two IROs continue to meet quarterly with the Adoption operational Service Manager. When exploring adoption for children many things need to be considered when making the right match between the child and the adopter, however the welfare of the child remains the priority. IROs are conscious of the need to identify matches early and to ensure parallel plans are in place whilst assessments are being undertaken as delay in making decisions can have an impact on the adoption progressing smoothly and this ultimately would not be in the best interests of the child. The IROs communicate any known issues impacting on children awaiting adoption and anything raised at LAC reviews.

**Children in Care Council** - one of the areas for focus last year was around developing an Annual Report specifically for children and young people. Two IROs have designed an outline of what this report would include in consultation with young people who attended an event at Centre Parcs in October 2017. IROs had a stall at this event and asked young people who came to the stall what their views were about having an annual report just for themselves and what topics they would like to have included. This proved to be very successful and the IROs have worked on producing a template which was presented to the No Labels group on 8<sup>th</sup> May 2018. Further consultation will take place with the No Labels sub groups before the final document is produced. It is the aim of this service to produce a young person's version of the Annual Report every year.

**Participation Group** - one IRO and one Child Protection Coordinator contribute to this group, work continues aiming to introduce an App for children and young people to provide feedback, its hoped this work being undertaken in consultation with Children in Care Council, will reach fruition before the end of the year.

#### **4. Profile of Looked After Children in Nottinghamshire**

- 4.1.** At the end of March 2018, there were 798 children and young people looked after by the Local Authority. This figure has continued to remain relatively stable throughout this year and has not changed from the previous year. The looked after rate per 10,000 at the end of the year was 49.1 which remains lower than the rates for both our statistical neighbours and the England average as at the end of 2016/17 which were 59.5 and 62 respectively. When considering the differences between our statistical neighbour's audits are undertaken on a three monthly basis and plans overseen by Child Protection Coordinators are viewed and no cases have been raised that would indicate children in need of being looked after are not being identified at an early stage. The role of the Child Protection Coordinators continues to be crucial in ensuring the appropriate action is taking place in respect of children where their needs are not being addressed and alternative care needs to be considered.



**4.2.** Of the 798 children and young people looked after at the end of March 627 were in foster care, (which comprises of 78.5% of the total LAC population) with 16 placed outside of the county, and 33 were children with a disability. In considering other placements a total of 78 children were placed in different residential settings, whilst 5 were subject to a secure placement on remand and 2 on welfare grounds. Out of the total of 798 children 58 (7.2%) of LAC population) were placed for adoption during the year.

**4.3.** When considering the age profile of the children who became looked after in Nottinghamshire over the past year 23% were between the ages of 0-11 years, 77% made up the LAC population of 12-18 year olds at the end of March 2018. Of the total number of young people accommodated 56% were male and 44% female, this figure is no different from 2106/17.

**4.4.** Of the total number of children who became looked after this year the majority were initially accommodated under section 20 of the Children Act 1989 (55.6%). This means that these children were accommodated at the request of and or in agreement with parent/s or those with parental responsibility. Section 20 accommodation is intended as a short-term measure pending either a return home or the commencement of care proceedings. Operational Service Managers send letters to the parents within 5 days of section 20 being agreed and monitor the situation closely thereafter. As soon as the plan changes from the child returning to the care of their parent's then consideration is given to initiating a Legal Planning Meeting. The IROs role is crucial during this period in ensuring there is no delay regarding assessments being completed and to consider the legal status of the child.

**4.5.** In terms of permanency outcomes during 2016/17, there has been a high number of children returning to the care of their parents (102), with young people progressing onto Independent Living being (96) and 34 children being made subject to a Special Guardianship Order. As previously noted also 58 (7.2%) of LAC population) were placed for adoption during the year. The IROs continue to ensure that a child's Care Plan is meeting their needs and that changes to the plan are made to reflect any change in circumstances.

## **5. Looked After Reviews**

- 5.1.** A total of 1805 reviews were chaired by IROs in the year ending of March 2018, of these 95.4% of these were held in timescale, which is a similar percentage from last year. This performance indicator is calculated on a rolling year basis for the previous 12 months, rather than a year to date figure for the financial year as reported previously.
- 5.2.** IROs complete some reviews in a series of meetings to ensure the relevant people are involved and the meeting remains child focused and friendly. Out of a total number of 379 children of young people became looked after at in 2017/18, neglect or abuse has continued to be the main reason (47%), with family dysfunction or the family being in acute stress also featuring highly, (36%).

## **6. Children and young people's participation in their reviews**

- 6.1.** The IRO service strives to ensure that children and young people participate in their review whether that be in person or through other creative means to include them in the review. Indeed in 2017/8 children aged 4 and over are recorded to have conveyed their views in over 91.6% of reviews, which signifies similar picture from the previous year which was 92%.
- 6.2.** The IRO monitoring data indicates that the majority of children and young people are consulted about the venue of the meeting and who they would like to attend the review. Of the total number of reviews held this year in respect of children aged 4 years and over, 42.4% had the child/young person attending the review meeting or part of their meeting. Of those who did not attend, 6.5% they asked an advocate to speak for them or 42.8% conveyed their views by other means to the review. When you look at the overall picture throughout the year both figures remain relatively consistent therefore children participating by attendance or other means continues to be high. There are examples where young people have been supported by their IRO to either chair or co-chair their own review. IROs are creative with the young people and discuss the best ways in which they can contribute to their review.
- 6.3.** Some children or young people make informed decisions not to attend their review but will participate in other ways such as completing the 'listen to me' document, providing their views in other written or pictorial forms, or alternatively meeting with their IRO prior to the review. IROs are increasingly visiting children and young people prior to reviews, and this can include observing very young children in placement with their carers'.

## **7. Identifying good practice and Dispute Resolution process**

- 7.1.** 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 an alert. In the first instance, the IRO will initiate an alert and seek to resolve

the concerns with the social work team manager. A record of this alert and outcome is placed on the child's file. If the matter is not resolved within the required 10 working day timescale then the IRO with their manager will then consider taking action by progressing to stage 1; this involves the operational service manager.

**7.2.** During the year 55 alerts were initiated by IROs to Social Care practitioners, data suggests there has been a reduction in the number of alerts initiated (68 in 16/17 and 91 in 15/16). The themes that have emerged from the alerts relate to a range of issues; lack of agreement plan around expectations of young mother in placement with baby, social work report not being available for the review, concern about lack of education/health plans, decision around placement move in line with young person's wishes and feelings, child placed in an unregulated placement and absence of assessment in respect of the child being placed, visits not undertaken within expected statutory timescales and contact between siblings not acted upon. When alerts are initiated the concerns raised are acknowledged and responded within the period of the next review.

**7.3.** IROs continue to monitor recommendations made at reviews between each meeting that takes place, if there is evidence of actions not being progressed the IRO will notify the Team Manager and if necessary initiate an alert formally. IROs will also raise concerns informally with Social Workers and Team Managers and will resolve these without initiating an alert. What is evident from the alerts initiated during 2017/18 is that only 7 were escalated to stage 1 which involves the Service Manager for the respective team and often is required when Team Managers does not respond to the alert within 10 working days. No alerts have been escalated to Group Manager level as all have been acted upon and resolved satisfactorily by the teams involved.

**7.4.** Within the Independent Chair Service it is expected external alerts are also considered with IROs when there are individual concerns about partner agencies contribution and delay in achieving good outcomes for the child/young person. There has only been one external alert initiated and this was around a young person not being offered the appropriate education placement in relation to his specific learning disabilities. This alert involved communication between Nottinghamshire and another Local Authority. IROs report that attendance at LAC reviews from partner agencies is generally good and if there are any concerns about their involvement then IROs will raise this informally in order to get a resolution. IROs report agencies involvement and contribution to the care plan is overall very good. Any intervention from the IRO is then recorded on the child's file to demonstrate IROs role in challenging partner agencies involved in the care planning process.

**7.5. Examples of where IRO has challenged educational provision**

When it was evident the educational provider was no longer able to meet a child's needs the IRO asked for an updated an assessment and for the educational psychologist to have some input into this as well. In challenging this the 14 year old has moved to a specialist school/residential placement and is now thriving. Included in their timetable is music therapy which is enabling the young person to become more vocal, which is a significant improvement. This means the young person is happier in themselves and their relationship with family has improved somewhat.

Another young person in mainstream school was not progressing so the IRO made links with the virtual school and this young person has moved to a more specialised school, this move has impacted on their presentation and they are now presenting as being much happier. The school are also enabling the young person to progress and are holding a birthday party for them so they feel more included.

## **8. Learning and development**

**8.1.** In the past year three seminars have been held which has involved IROs from the nine local authorities within the region, a training group which involves some managers from the region work together to pull together topics and arrange speakers to deliver on these. This continues to be a valuable opportunity in respect of IROs sharing their own experiences and offering suggestions with new developments. The topics over the past year have been; Dilemmas in Adoption and challenges for the IRO when agreeing the care plan, The hidden responsibilities of the IRO- the additional tasks they undertake that is not descriptive within the IRO Handbook, working with CAFCASS and challenges between the two roles. Often case studies are integrated within the seminars and this creates much discussion and debate between the IROs and draws out the strength and challenges of their role when working with complex situations. These sessions are extremely valuable and effective in cementing good working relationships across the region.

### **8.2. National and Regional IRO Managers groups**

The ICS service manager chairs the regional IRO managers meeting which takes place four times a year and is now a member of the National IRO managers partnership group which meets at the DFE (Department for Education) office in London. IRO managers from across England meet quarterly at the Dfe building in London. Over the past year consultations has taken place with IRO managers around the Care Planning guidance which was being reviewed. This involved members of the group reviewing certain sections of the care planning guidance individually and then feeding back views to Dfe for consideration. As a group we have individual practice leads send feedback to national group after seeking views from the Regional Groups. We have had speakers from CAFCASS, Head of Practice and Ofsted who have provided feedback about expectations and how IRO services are performing nationally.

During March 2018 the government commissioned a piece of work on foster carers and from this the 'The Foster Care in England' report made a number of recommendations which the government is considering and intends to provide a response to its findings in the summer.

## **9. Feedback from children, young people, parents/carers and professionals**

**9.1.** Children, their carer's and parents continue to make positive comments about the involvement of the IRO in their lives and for many the IRO has been the most consistent professional. With the number of young people progressing onto independent living some have been sad to end their relationship with the IRO and have appreciated the support and guidance provided whilst in care. The service values the views of children and feedback was sought from those young people aged 9 years and over, parents/carers and professionals who attended a LAC review in February/March

2018. We are in the process of collating the feedback on this and will be considered, initial findings is not dissimilar to the feedback we received during 2016/17

**9.2.** The Quality and Improvement team however has sought feedback from carers/young people and professionals from April 2017 about the service they have received. The comments below relate to parents;

The IRO came to my house and spoke with me to gain my views

They were fair/polite and nice

Excellent communication and respect for the chair

From Foster Carers:

We all know each other pretty well after 5 years and conversation therefore is easy

Thorough and relaxing

Listened to respectfully

General comments about the IRO

Clear about her role and independence- Supervising SW

Lovely child focused review- Residential SW

Everyone made to feel at ease and welcome- LAC SW

Agenda is really helpful. Included participants throughout- Therapist Fostering Agency

Young person was very well supported- Teacher

Meeting done at a good pace for parents who have learning difficulties- SW

Young person involved in discussions and voiced their views- Advocate

An experienced and excellent IRO who is respectful and listens to participants, good safeguarding skills. Children's Guardian

From Young People

They listened to me

There was good communication

I understood everything and got all the answers I wanted to hear

It's good to know I have all the support

Things happen at the review

What could be done differently?

Earlier discussions about independence as it is scary and hits you like a truck

Find Listen to me booklets babyish

Talk about my flat more and about living independently

Have more choice about venue, meeting to take place at school

Not to invite people that are not welcome.

## **10. Key findings**

- The LAC population has remained stable throughout the year which has enabled IROs to continue to fulfil the wider expectations of their role; including contacting children/young people in advance of reviews and monitoring a child's case on an on-going basis.
- Feedback about the IRO role continues to be mainly positive
- Reviews indicate a good level of child participation and evidence of the voice of the child.



- A draft of the a Child friendly Annual Report has been produced just awaiting feedback from No Labels sub groups
- IROs are continuing to develop their lead roles and taking part with inductions for new SW staff.
- Alerts being initiated continues to be low however there is evidence of IROs having informal discussions with SW/Team Managers and partner agencies.
- IROs continue to be committed to regional seminars and have reflected on discussions and initiatives from other local authorities when exploring their own practice.

## **11. Areas for focus during 2017-18**

- Finalise the child friendly Annual Report and circulate.
- Develop a cohesive relationship with regional Child Protection Coordinators and embed joint seminars with IROS in the future.
- Sustain a strong connectivity with the National IRO Managers Group and the Regional Groups to drive forward initiatives in relation to Looked After Children.
- Review operation and efficacy of the dispute resolution process with internal and external alerts.
- Ensure the IRO service is linked with the Looked After Children and Care leavers Partnership Strategy and is informed by developments.
- Consider independent reviewing of care leavers plans.
- The ICS to be an agent of change by providing a robust and challenging service whilst being clear about its independence now it is located within the Commissioning and Resources service

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11.05.18