

NOTTINGHAMSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL
Annual Report of Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Service
April 2015 – March 2016

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 role 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 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 Corporate Parenting Board, 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 2014-2015 will be addressed in the body of the report.

2. Purpose of Service and Legal Context

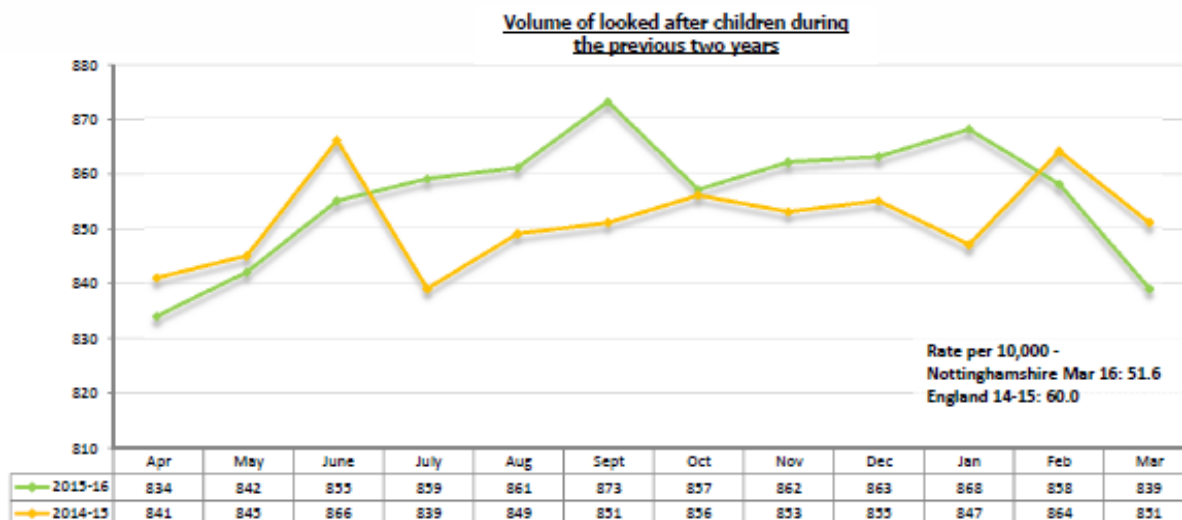
- 2.1 The legal framework for the IRO service is set out in the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 and the IRO Handbook 2010. The role of the IRO is to ensure that Nottinghamshire County Council acts as a responsible corporate parent, and that the child's care plan fully reflects their current needs and is consistent with the local authority's legal responsibilities towards the child. The IRO has a key role in relation to the improvement of care planning for Looked After Children and for challenging drift and delay.
- 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 on-going basis

3. Staffing/workload

- 3.1 The establishment for the IRO team is 14 (full time equivalent). It has been necessary to continue to use limited agency staff during the year in order to maintain capacity and provide an effective service. However, recruitment activity has been on-going and internal 12 month secondment opportunities have also been offered. During the year we have successfully recruited two permanent IROs and there have been three secondment positions; this set against 3 experienced IROs leaving the service. As at the end of March 2016 there was one agency worker covering a vacancy in the team. Following very recent recruitment activity there is a preferred candidate for a permanent appointment with a view to a start date being in June 2016. This will result in the team having no vacancies and the cessation of the contract of the remaining agency worker.
- 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 consisting of 50-70 children/young people. Caseloads have varied throughout the year depending on stability in staffing and the experience of the IRO. The more experienced IROs caseloads have tended to be slightly higher than the guidance recommends, between 70 and 75, which has allowed new IROs to have lower and gradually increasing caseloads. Given the stability in the number of LAC children in Nottinghamshire, it is envisaged that once the staffing group is stabilised then all caseloads will be within the recommended national guidance.
- 3.3 Within the team lead roles are designated to IROs who develop specialist knowledge. For example working with children with disabilities, those who are unaccompanied asylum seeking children 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 also include participation of young people, liaison with CAF/CASS/the Virtual School/Local Family Justice Board/Children in Care Council and foster carers meetings.

4. Profile of Looked After Children in Nottinghamshire

- 4.1 As at the end of March 2016, there were 839 children and young people looked after by the authority. This figure has remained relatively stable throughout this year and the previous year. This total figure includes 27 children with disabilities who are accommodated under an agreed series of short-term breaks. The looked after rate per 10,000 at the end of the year was 51.6 which remains lower than the rates for both our statistical neighbours and the England average as at the end of 2014/15 which were 57.8 and 60 respectively. Whilst there is no target to increase the LAC numbers in Nottinghamshire to bring it in line with our statistical neighbours, it is crucial to ensure that children in need of protection are accommodated in a timely way. The child protection coordinators in the ICS have a role within this and will raise an alert if it is felt that the accommodation of a child is necessary and appropriate actions are either not taking place or are drifting.



- 4.2 A total number of 366 children or young people became Looked After in Nottinghamshire between April 2015 and March 2016. Neglect or abuse has continued to be the main reason (42%), with family dysfunction or the family being in acute stress also featuring highly.
- 4.3 A significant percentage of the children who became looked after in Nottinghamshire over the past year were under the age of 1 (59 children: 16%). This demonstrates early recognition of concerns from historical information, timely assessment and actions to safeguard children where necessary. It would be reasonable to expect that the majority of these children will either be adopted or secure other permanence plans with family members or a return home. There were also a high number of 15 -17 years olds (94 children: 26%) who were looked after over the year, which includes a number of vulnerable homeless 16 and 17 year olds. Indeed 15 to 17 year olds made up 31% of the LAC population at the end of March 2016.
- 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 (75%). This means that these children were accommodated at the request of and or in agreement with parent/s or those with parental responsibility. Updated guidance was recently introduced in Nottinghamshire regarding the use of section 20 accommodation in situations where there are child protection concerns. Section 20 accommodation is intended as a short-term measure pending either a return home or the commencement of care proceedings, and these cases are now being more closely monitored by both the operational service managers and the IROs both in relation to preventing delay and ensuring informed consent by parents. At the end of March 2016, 35% of the total LAC population in Nottinghamshire were section 20 accommodated, and the majority of these were 15-17 years of age.
- 4.5 There has been significant challenge in reducing the length of Court proceedings, which are to be concluded within 26 weeks. Performance is improving and the IRO has a role within this to ensure that appropriate plans are in place to undertake assessment activity in a timely way and involving wider family members at an early stage.
- 4.6 There has been a steady percentage of children returning home to live with

parents, being made subject to special guardianship orders or adoption orders and also young people progressing onto independent living, which has contributed to the LAC population in Nottinghamshire remaining stable throughout the year. IROs have a key role in ensuring that a child's Care Plan is continuing to meet their needs and that changes to the plan are made to reflect any change in circumstances. The following example illustrates this:

- *A 5 year old boy was accommodated in foster care in 2011 and made the subject of a Care Order due to parents' alcohol use and associated poor parenting. In a LAC review in September 2014 it was recognised by the IRO who had been involved since he was first accommodated that there had been significant change in parent's circumstances and an further updated parenting assessment was recommended. This assessment was positive and the child was subsequently rehabilitated to his parents' care and the Care Order was discharged in August 2015.*

5. Looked After Reviews

- 5.1 IROs chaired 2,431 LAC reviews (including 61 short break LAC reviews) between April 2015 and March 2016. This is an increase in the total number of reviews from the previous year (2,263). IROs are required to hold looked after reviews earlier than the statutory intervals in circumstances such as if a child has moved placements on an unplanned basis or where a significant change to the child's care plan is required. This would explain why the number of reviews held has increased despite the LAC population remaining stable.
- 5.2 The percentage of children who had all of their looked after reviews held as set out in statutory timescale between April 2015 and March 2016 was 92.2%. This is an improvement from the end of March 2015, which was 90.5% although it is noted that this remains below the local target. Primary reasons for reviews being held out of timescale are late requests being made for initial LAC reviews, and dates having to be rearranged due to changes in staffing and availability of either the social worker or IRO. When reviews have been held out of timescale the large majority have been rearranged within one week or in exceptional circumstance a fortnight.

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

- 6.1 The IRO service has continued to work hard to ensure that children and young people participate in their review. Indeed in 2015/6 children aged 4 and over are recorded to have conveyed their views in over 94% of reviews, which signifies continued improvement from the previous year.
- 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, 43.7% had the child/young person attending the review meeting or part of their meeting. There are examples where young people have been supported by their IRO to either chair or co-chair their own review. This can be a daunting task for a young person but also very rewarding. IROs are creative with the young people and discuss the best ways in which they can contribute to their review. This can be illustrated in the following example:

- *A young person had initially been too anxious to attend their LAC reviews. The IRO talked to them about how they could best contribute and consequently the young person decided that they wanted to make a power point presentation; they came to part of their review and talked through the presentation called “the real me”. This included slides about me, my foster family, and parents; and included written updates, pictures, and photographs. Within this the young person was able to portray how they were feeling and what they were happy or worried about. This style of contribution by the young person has been really positive and they have continued to produce presentations for their subsequent review meetings. Indeed the young person’s views are very much heard in their review and all attendees look forward to seeing the presentation.*
- 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’.
- 6.4 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. During the year, particular focus has been given to developing a ‘person centred approach’ to reviews, which is intended to be less adult orientated and more child/young person focussed. 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. Person centred planning can be particularly successful in engaging teenagers and disabled young people in their reviews. The following examples illustrates positive ways in which the person centred approach has been utilised:
- *A young person was allocated a specific IRO who was experienced in utilising the person centred approach as he was not engaging with the LAC review process as he thought it was boring, but it was evident that he would participate in education meetings that had been completed in a person centred style. The IRO worked closely with the social worker to prepare the young person, his grandparents and professionals for the review meeting. The outcome was positive and the young person engaged well with his review; he remained in the review meeting throughout and did not get angry or upset as he had done previously. The young person appeared to benefit from hearing what people ‘liked and admired’ about him. It was also clear that the young person managed better with people writing things down on paper in respect of ‘what’s not working’ rather than hearing this directly from the person. He also benefitted from the visual aspect of the meeting and the clear action plan moving forward. The young person is now 16 years of age and is continuing to engage in his looked after process and review meetings.*
 - *An IRO decided to utilise the person centred approach for a review following some negative views/attitude towards a young person; the IRO thought that it would re-focus the review on being the child’s meeting and also acknowledge the positives about the young person. Feedback following the meeting from those who attended felt that the*

person centred format had been more positive and productive. The young person had not attended the meeting but did receive feedback from the IRO; they had been especially keen to hear what the foster carer, the mother and other professionals had said about “what they liked and admired” about them. The young person is now keen to attend future reviews.

7. LAC review minutes and child friendly reports

- 7.1 A record of the review meeting is produced by the IRO and the local target for these minutes to be distributed is 20 working days. The timeliness of the distribution of review minutes has continued to be monitored and the average throughout the year has been 76%, which is comparable to the previous year. ICS managers continue to audit the quality of the review minutes. Further work has also been undertaken on the agendas to ensure consistency, that the voice of the child is clearly recorded and that any safeguarding issues are documented and addressed including concerns relating to child sexual exploitation or missing.
- 7.2 Work has been undertaken in consultation with the Nottinghamshire children in care council on producing child friendly reports from reviews ‘my LAC review report’. This document is written specifically for the child and is in addition to the standard minutes. The report is considerably shorter and simplified; focusing on what the care plan is, what has gone well since the last review, how they are feeling and what they want to achieve going forward and actions required. This approach is being piloted in order that further clarification and guidance can be provided regarding when and how they should be used, with the plan to extend to all relevant reviews.

8. Dispute Resolution process

- 8.1 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.
- 8.2 During the year 91 alerts were initiated by IROs to Social Care practitioners, which is a significant reduction from the 137 alerts the previous year. The themes that emerge from alerts largely relate to concerns regarding care planning; drift and delay in respect of recommendations not being completed from the previous review, assessments not being completed in a timely manner where a decision is needed to progress the care plan, and the completion and quality of pathway plans for young people who are preparing to leave care. It is recognised that instability and changes in social worker can impact on planning for reviews, statutory visits not being undertaken in timescale, and drift and delay in care planning, and when this is the case this has been noted in the alert.
- 8.3 In relation to outcomes, there were no alerts this year that were escalated

above stage 1/service manager level. The following illustrates an example of a positive outcome from an alert:

- *An IRO had concerns regarding proposed changes to contact arrangement between 2 siblings and their father. The IRO had been involved with the children for 7 years although there had been various changes in social worker. Father had requested that his contact with the children progress to unsupervised and an assessment based on the current quality of the contact was largely positive. However the IRO felt that the updated assessment had failed to take into account the historical concerns and risks, and an alert was initiated to request that no changes were made to the contact arrangements until a comprehensive updated risk assessment was undertaken. This assessment was subsequently undertaken and it was decided that unsupervised contact would not be in the children's best interest; the children have continued to enjoy regular contact with their father whilst ensuring that they are safeguarded from any harm.*

8.4 If considered necessary, IROs will also note concerns with external partners by raising this with the individual concerned and then following this up in writing. Ensuring that any relevant issues for partner organisations are effectively raised and recorded was an area of development for 2015-16. Discussions have been undertaken with the staff group regarding any barriers to this, and the ICS Service Managers have ensured that if any significant concerns are raised by IROs regarding partner agencies that these have been followed up and recorded. The number of instances of this happening has remained very low.

8.5 Whilst it is important that IROs raise concerns about poor practice it is equally important to highlight where practice has been outstanding and has had a significant impact on the outcomes for a child/young person. Indeed this is particularly important in generating a culture of continuous improvement. IROs do alert Social Care managers and senior managers when practice has been outstanding. Compliments are also made by IROs regarding foster carers and residential homes when the support they have provided a child or young person is felt to be exceptional.

9. Case tracking/monitoring

9.1 In line with the requirements of the IRO handbook, IROs monitor children and young people's cases on an on-going basis. They specifically scrutinise and track the most vulnerable children; these being subject to child sexual exploitation and children regularly missing from care. IROs will record when they have viewed a child's file or liaised with the social worker or team manager, in order to demonstrate their on-going involvement and impact on the case.

10. Learning and development

10.1 The ICS service managers have continued to attend quarterly IRO regional managers meetings, this has been positive in terms of sharing new developments and good practice, and planning regional IRO training workshops. The meetings have also been a good mechanism to either feed

information into or provide feedback from the national IRO managers group and work plan.

- 10.2 Regional training workshops for IROs have continued to be held quarterly throughout 2015-16, and topics have included care planning, person centred planning and evidence of effectiveness. There is good attendance by the IROs in Nottinghamshire who value this role specific training. There have also been 2 joint training events over the year between the IRO service in Nottinghamshire and Nottingham City and CAFCASS. The topics included addressing CSE and 'together or apart' sibling assessments.

11. Feedback from children, young people, parents/carers and professionals

- 11.1 Feedback was sought from those young people aged 9 years and over, parents/carers and professionals who attended a LAC review in February 2016. Questionnaires were given out following 85 LAC reviews and the feedback is very encouraging. In respect of the 31 young people who completed a questionnaire it showed that those who attended their review felt listened to and had spoken to the IRO prior to the review, they felt involved in the meeting and all fully understood and agreed with the decisions that were made. This high level of satisfaction is consistent with a previous similar exercise that was undertaken in November 2014. It is worth noting that the rate of young people reporting that they had the opportunity to speak to the IRO prior to the review has continued to improve on previous feedback. Collating the views of children and young people on a regular basis will continue, including how technology can be utilised.
- 11.2 Feedback questionnaires were completed by 398 professionals and parents/carers who attended reviews in February 2016, and these were equally positive towards the IROs and the review meeting and again comparable to previous feedback. Professionals and nearly all parents/carers felt welcomed by the IRO, they were given time to share information, felt respected by the IRO, and left the meetings with a clear understanding of the care plan for the child/young person.
Comments made included:
- *I was asked my views throughout the meeting – parent.*
 - *Very good meeting, young person centred – residential worker.*
 - *Wonderful, brilliant, thank you – parent.*
- 11.3 The managers and the IRO service continue to seek and learn from service user feedback. Exploring how the service can obtain the views of children aged 5-9 years was an area of development for the past year. This was discussed with the Nottinghamshire Children in Care Council - No Labels Group, and the feedback received was that the 'listen to me' booklets that children are already encouraged to complete prior to their reviews gives the opportunity for these children to put forward their views regarding the wider service. They were not recommending that any further tools were developed.
- 11.4 Seeking views/feedback from children and young people who were having a LAC review at the time they were also subject to a Social Care case file audit

was previously identified as an area for development in order that these views could be included in the audit findings. This was undertaken but the methodology did not generate a sufficient return rate to provide any qualitative information.

- 11.5 There have been no formal complaints made to the independent chair service in relation to independent reviewing officers during 2015/16. Given the large number of LAC reviews held, this demonstrates the skilled way the IROs chair and manage complex meetings.

12. 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.
- Recruitment activity has been positive and secondment opportunities have been offered to generate further interest in the role.
- IROs are continuing to find creative ways to ensure that children and young people are able to contribute to or attend their reviews.
- Child friendly reports from reviews are being piloted.
- There has been a significant reduction in the number of alerts being initiated by IROs to Social Care practitioners. There continue to be good examples of child centred challenges made by IROs to promote good outcomes for children and young people.
- There continues to be positive feedback from children/young people, parents/carers and other professionals regarding the IRO service.
- IROs continue to value the role specific regional training opportunities that promote development and effectiveness.

13. Areas for focus during 2016-17.

- Development of the use of technology in ascertaining children and young people's wishes and feelings regarding their care plan, and also wider feedback regarding the IRO service.
- Implementation of child friendly reports from reviews.
- Further development of the 'person centred approach' in reviews.
- Explore alternative methods of gaining feedback on the IRO service.

29.04.16
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Independent Chair Service

Safeguarding and Independent Review