



From Strength to Strength

NOTTINGHAMSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL
Annual Report of Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Service
April 2020 – March 2021

Independent Chair Service vision statement:

The aim of the Independent Chair Service is to promote 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.

1. Introduction

The Independent Chair Service in Nottinghamshire is part of the Safeguarding and Independent Review Service, it is positioned in the Commissioning and Resources Division thus achieving greater independence. 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 statutory function of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO). A separate report is available in respect of the Child Protection Coordinator part of the service.

2. Purpose and legal context

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.

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).

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 ensures and 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 and provides good standards of care and services to the children they care for.

3. Profile of team - Specialisms/training/seminars/national group

The establishment for the IRO group at year end 2020/21 is 15 (full time equivalent) and the team is currently up to full capacity. 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 responsibility for the care plans of 50-70 children/young people. Due to the continuing growth of the looked after population over the last few years IROs in Nottinghamshire have had responsibility for at least 70 and sometimes more care plans for children and young people.

In terms of diversity, the profile of the service does not mirror the composition of the looked after population but is representative of a range of protected characteristics including gender, age, sexuality, ethnicity, and cultural backgrounds. The team has a good balance of experienced IROs and those new to the team. They offer a wide range of skills and knowledge which enriches the service offered to the children and young people of Nottinghamshire. The role of the IRO is seen as significant especially for those children who have been looked after for many years and can be the most long-standing professional relationship they experience.

Due to the emergence of the coronavirus in March 2020 and in line with the government guidance the service adapted quickly to the use of technology to ensure services continued to be delivered in the most appropriate and effective way. All meetings have been undertaken remotely either via email, telephone, video or skype and where the risk to the child was significant, and if it was safe to do so, then a face to face meeting could be considered. During this unprecedented time the service has shown a great commitment to the looked after children and young people whilst facing challenging personal circumstances at the same time. The protection of vulnerable children has remained a shared responsibility with social care and our partners during the periods of lock down to ensure they are safe and feel protected.

4. The key priority areas for 2020/21

Below are the priorities identified for the last year, these have been addressed in the body of this report with some having been completed with others either in the development or implementation stage. Inevitably the global pandemic has impacted on the progression of some of the planned work, but we have continued to progress and implement as much of the work as possible.

1. Work to be undertaken with Childrens Social Care to incorporate a strength-based approach when working with Nottinghamshire's looked after children population
2. Revisit all documents produced from the review and undertake more detailed work with the Children in Care Council on how to provide child friendly reports, records and care plans for children and young people of all ages.
3. Work with partner organisations in respect of implementing "Nottinghamshire's Children, Nottinghamshire's Future" strength-based approach-to include the implementation of an electronic portal for organisations to submit reports on a consistent template in advance to meetings.
4. Review of current escalation process within the Independent Chair Service to a strength-based model that will offer high support and high challenge to improve practice and outcomes for children
5. To strengthen and improve the quality assurance role of the IRO so that its contribution to improved practice and outcomes for looked after children is transparent and evidence

based. This will primarily focus on improved relationships with operational social work teams using strength based restorative practice.

6. Create capacity by reviewing the processes currently in place to support IROs so they can visit children more and quality assure plans in between reviews
7. To improve the work around the IRO lead roles and promote the importance of their role within the Authority.
8. To continue to work with young people directly and encourage them to attend reviews and chair them.
9. Offering the Post 18 service to those who need it and ensuring we are working in a strength-based way.

5. Strengths based developments within the service

The department has continued to deliver training to all staff in line with its commitment to the implementation of strength-based practice. In addition to the departmental training the Independent Chair Service has undertaken ongoing sessions within team meetings to develop their knowledge and skills to work within a strength based and restorative model of practice. This has been facilitated with the support of the Educational Psychologist Service and has been instrumental in driving cultural change and practice improvement within the service.

The commitment to the above has meant that the service has been and continues to be instrumental in leading and supporting their operational social work colleagues with adopting a strength-based model. Within the service the initial work has focused on child protection conferences and in April a phased implementation began in the south of the county using the new model of practice. This included revised, agendas, reports, records of meetings and additional expectations on Child Protection Coordinators to have contact with families prior to conference and to hold mid-way reviews to track the progression of plans. Within this we have worked closely with our partner agencies and there is an ongoing piece of work to revise agency reports and to support and facilitate more effective multi-agency working specifically in respect of children in need of protection and care.

The work that has taken place in respect of conferences will provide preparation and groundwork for the same changes to be made to our reviews for looked after children over the coming months.

Other developments within the service have included

- The review of the process used to challenge and raise concerns with operational social work teams, fostering and external agencies to ensure that it is transparent and accountable but also restorative focusing on the child's needs thus improving practice and consequently outcomes.
- The implementation of 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.
- Improved 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 and the importance of relational based practice to achieve this. As part of this process the IROs are linked to individual social work and fostering teams and regularly attend team meetings as well as meeting with service managers on a quarterly basis to identify and share examples of good practice and areas for improvement and put plans in place to address these.

As part of their practice development role the IROs participate in regional seminars. These involve facilitators from neighbouring local authorities presenting specific topics around looked after children and occur four times a year. The focus of the seminars is to enable IROs to reflect upon their own practice with other colleagues within the region and share good practice. The regional group met more frequently from March 2020 to offer support to each other and share different practices whilst working remotely with our looked after children and young people.

The assistant director for Leicestershire County Council has recently joined the regional group and will provide a direct link between operational managers and service directors across the East Midlands. The group is currently contributing to the regional improvement and innovation alliance plan 2020/21, which is reviewed quarterly throughout the year. The plan focused on key achievements and activities of the group prior to lockdown and the achievements during the priority areas for group the year head.

Ambitions for 2021/22

- To fully embed a strength based restorative model of practice into our work with looked after children
- To ensure this is a collaborative process initially working with the Children in Care Council and the young people placed in Nottinghamshire residential children's homes.

6. Voice of Nottinghamshire children and young people

Nottinghamshire is committed to achieving positive outcomes for children and young people, whilst focusing on their strengths and celebrating their achievements. The Independent Chair Service is promoting a reflective learning culture and encouraging high support and challenge. IROs have become more creative with their contact with children and young people to enquire about their wellbeing, this has resulted in different forms of communication; by a regular phone call, an email, a WhatsApp message, by video or by letter or pictures. The IROs embrace creative practice and praise the positive work undertaken with looked after children. They are central to ensuring children are safe, happy, healthy and are being supported to build a promising future. The IRO service ensures the voice of children and young people are listened to and any issues raised are addressed and responded to appropriately. Every effort is made to ensure their voice is reflected within the looked after process, some choosing to speak with the IRO on their own, some come to their review and some ask an advocate to speak on their behalf.

Below is a table showing the percentage of Nottinghamshire children who attended and participated in their review over the past three years

Total number of reviews held	2018-19 1850	2019-20 2159	2020-21 2635
Definition of participation	% of total reviews	% of total reviews	% of total reviews
Child under 4 at time of review	NA	NA	NA
Child attends and speaks for themselves	40.1	41.9	42.0
Child attends and an advocate speaks for them	1.0	0.2	0.5
Child attends and conveys their views non-verbally	0.2	0.2	0.1
Child attends; does not speak for themselves/convey their views	0.4	0.4	0.6

Child does not attend but asks advocates to speak for them	5.3	4.5	4.2
Child does not attend but conveys their feelings to the review	44.1	44.3	45.2
Child does not attend nor convey their views to the review	6.0	6.3	5.4

The picture around participation continues to be consistent and stable over the past 3 years 43.2 (at end of 2021) attending their reviews and verbally participating or asking their advocate to speak on their behalf. Whilst those who have not attended 49.4 (at end of 2021) asked someone to advocate on their behalf or convey their feelings to the review, or convey their views through using Mind of My Own app. Of those who did not participate, IROs will elicit how they are feeling through their social worker or carer, these tend to be young people who either do not want to be involved with the process or are happy to be informed of the review outcome from carers or workers afterwards.

The IROs continue to promote the Mind of My Own app which was launched in 2019. IROs encourage children and young people to use this app although many prefer to verbalise their views or ask someone else to speak on their behalf. This tool makes it easier for children and young people to express their views, thoughts, and feelings to social workers/IROs and any other staff working within Nottinghamshire. They can send their views, wishes and feelings to their workers at any time they want.

IROs continue to encourage young people to chair/co-chair their own review with their own agendas where appropriate. Although many of the young people have found their reviews being conducted remotely quite a challenge and have preferred for their carer or another adult to speak on their behalf. IROs will continue to encourage them to consider co-chairing their reviews.

IROs have a responsibility to ensure children and young people are made aware of the complaint's procedure which they can use if they are not satisfied with the service they are being provided or if they wish to raise any issues. IROs are notified by the complaints team when any issues arise. Over this past year there has been a handful of complaints made which have been acted upon and addressed swiftly leading to a satisfactory resolution for the children.

IROs are represented at the Children in Care Council every time it meets, and they participate in projects being undertaken. As a service we are continually looking at ways to improve the service being offered to children and as part of the service's new vision we are going to explore our ideas on how we do meetings differently to the Children in Care Council and undertake some work with a small group of young people so we can listen to and incorporate their views. Last year we took a proposal to the Children in Care Council about completing two films, one for younger children and one for older adolescents. Work was progressed on the film for older adolescents but has been delayed on several occasions due to the three periods of lockdown over the past year. The aim of the film is to explain to children and young people which adults will support them through their looked after journey and the reasons why. The films will also be suitable to inform a broader audience of professionals (health, schools, carers, social work teams, voluntary services) and anyone interested in how looked after children are cared for within Nottinghamshire. It is hoped if there are no further interruptions with production this film will be completed by the summer.

7. Ambitions for 2020/21

- To actively support more children and young people to access independent advocates.
- To create capacity and a culture where IROs speak to young people at least once between reviews and two weeks prior to the review to ensure they are fully prepared and can participate.
- To hold child focus reviews where the child is empowered to participate, and their voices heard including child friendly agendas, reports, and minutes.

8. Achievements of children and young people



Below is a poem written by a young person who gave permission for this to be included in this annual report. This is being published through a Poetry Odessey, a collection of Verse which will be in the National Library. This is a powerful poem and the young person is very proud of this achievement.

The Smile

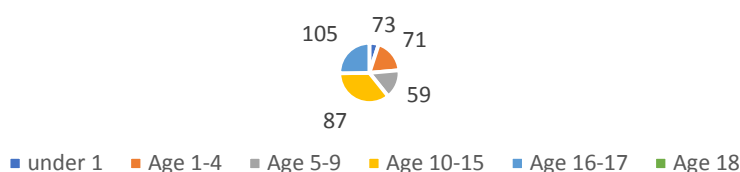
The smile you see isn't always true
The sadness I feel is nothing new
My feelings are unnoticed
Because I never show this
The thoughts that go through my head
Feelings like I'm numb and dead
Sometimes I want to scream and shout
But I never let these feelings out
The smile you see is never true
But the sadness I feel is something I'll get through



9. Nottinghamshire Children and Young People Data 2020/2021

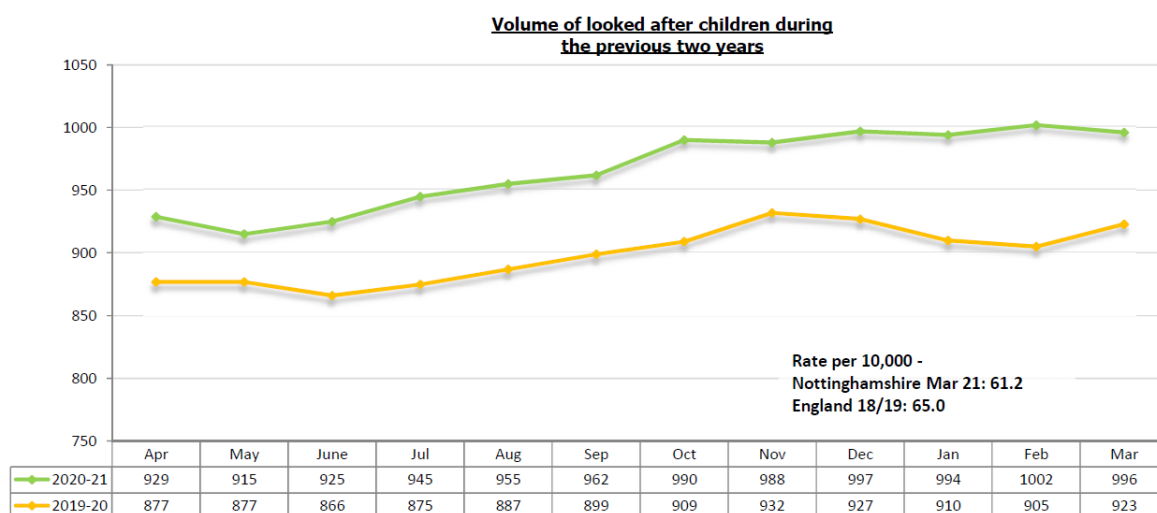
At the end of March 2021, Nottinghamshire had responsibility for 996 looked after children and young people (a rate of 61.2) per 10.000 children in comparison to last year there were 923 looked after children at a rate of 56.8 per 10.000 children. When considering the age groups of admissions as in previous years there are more boys 50.1% of the total for year with 41.5% of girls who become looked after, this figure reflects children who may have been admitted more than once in the year.

Age groups of 395 admissions during 2020/21



Of the 395 children and young people accommodated, 326 (82.5%) were white, 6 (1.5%) were of Asian/Asian British, 2 (0.50%) black or black British, 36 (9.1%) mixed heritage and 18 (4.5%) were of other groups.

As illustrated in the graph below, over the past year there has been a steady growth in the looked after population. When comparing these figures to our statistical neighbours and nationally these figures reflect the same trend of growth but continue to remain lower than our neighbours and nationally.



Of the 996 looked after children as of 31st March 17 (1.7%) were unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and 2 (0.20%) were placed in a secure children's home.

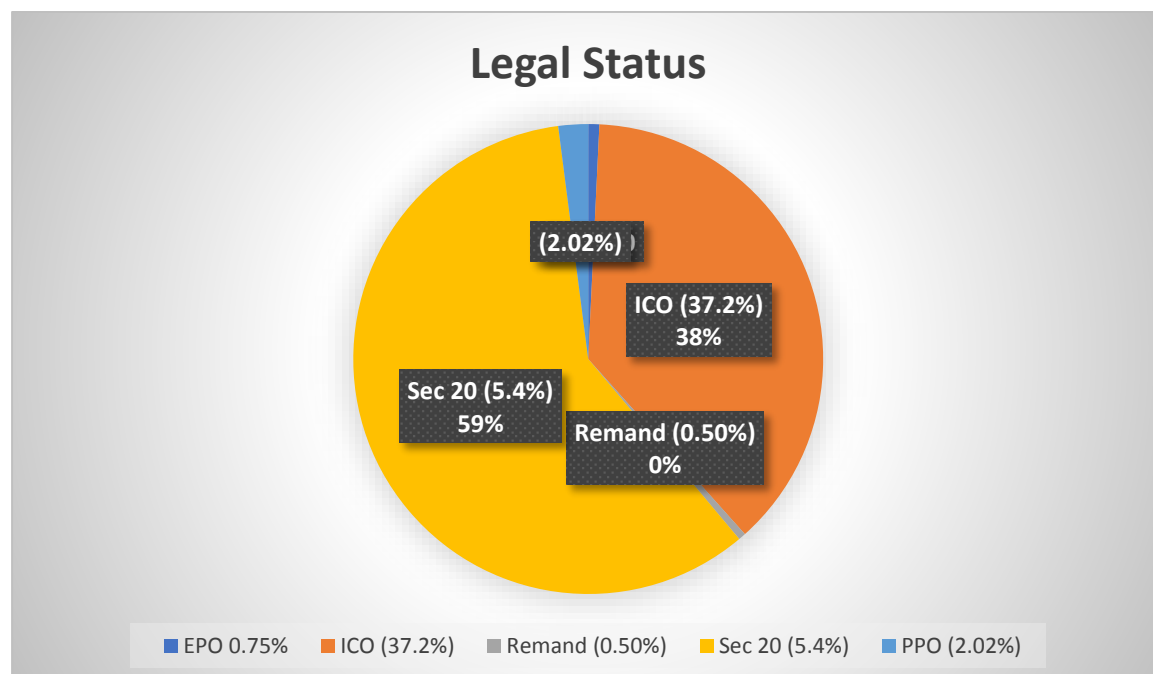
Of the 308 children and young people who were discharged in the year, 52 (16.8%) returned to the care of their parents, 86 (27.9%) went onto independent living, 31 (10.06%) were made subject to a Special Guardianship Order and 2 (0.6%) were sentenced to custody.

Child Protection Coordinators within the service have an overview of children who are subject to child protection plans, they will ensure plans are progressed and in reducing the risk of significant harm. They will make recommendations about considering alternative care when it is clear the risk is not able to be managed and is having a detrimental impact on the overall wellbeing of the child/ren. As IROs and Child Protection Coordinators are part of the same service they regularly liaise with each other about children on dual plans and ensure a single plan is appropriate unless the children are to be rehabilitated back home. The Service Managers in the Independent Chair Service review all the plans of children who have recently come into local authority care to ensure these are being progressed in a timely manner and the appropriate assessments are being undertaken to consider their long-term care.

At the point of coming into care usually an agreement with parents under section 20 of the Children Act 1989 is made. This is a short-term measure pending either a return home or the commencement of care proceedings. IROs need to confirm what the plan is by the second review at the 4 months stage to prevent drift, delay, and secure permanence for the child. As soon as the plan changes from the child returning to the care of their parents 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.

Of the total number of children becoming looked after during the past year (395), 147 (37.2%) were made subject of an ICO and 231 (58.4%) had a single period of accommodation under sec 20.

Legal Status of 395 children admitted into care during 2020/21



As identified in the above diagram the IROs ensure that children have the right legal status at the time to reflect their immediate and long-term needs.

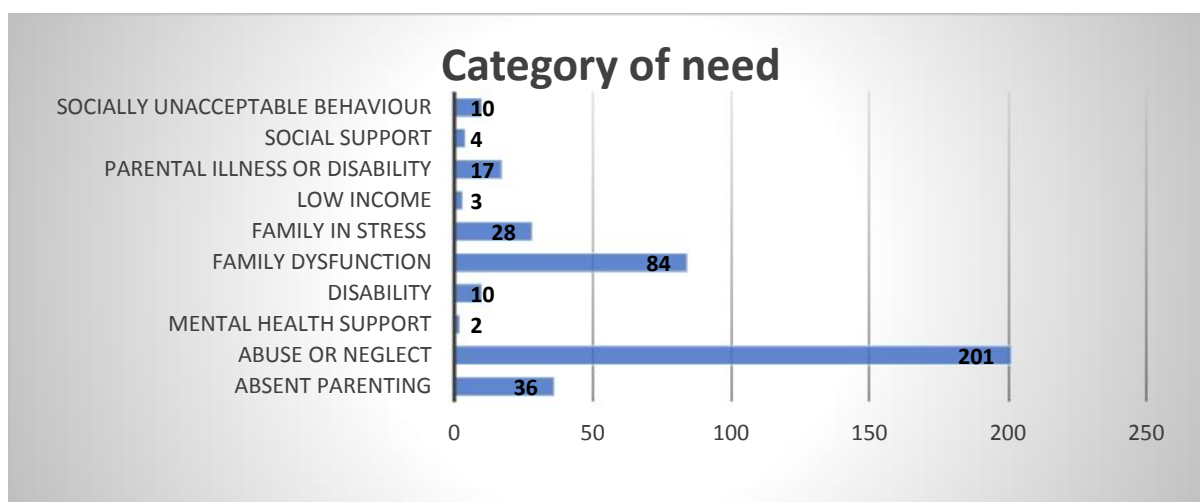
10. Our children and young people's statutory reviews-timeliness and participation

Looked After Reviews

A total of 2635 reviews were chaired by IROs in the year ending of March 2021, (this is a significant increase from the year before where 2159 reviews were held) of these 97.6% were held in timescale, which is a similar percentage from last year.

It is not surprising that the main reason for children becoming looked after is due to neglect, of the 395 in total for the year of 20120/21 50.8% were due to neglect and abuse which is a similar figure to last year. Other factors involved family dysfunction, absent parenting and family in acute stress featured highly 37.4%.

Nottinghamshire children category of need at time of admission to care



11. Identifying good practice and the Concerns Resolution Process

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 or their team manager informally but if this is not achievable then a formal concern is raised. A record of this concern and outcome is placed on the child's file. If the matter is not resolved within the required 10 working day timescale the IRO with their manager will then consider escalating to the operational service manager.

During this year only 63 formal alerts were initiated by IROs with Social Care practitioners, data suggests, (as noted in the table below) this is significantly lower than the previous year but reflects the percentage raised in previous years before that.

Alerts by year	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Number initiated	68	55	68	113	63

The themes that have emerged from the alerts for this year relate to a range of issues; Lack of clear plan in respect of child (14.3%), care plan not being implemented fully (12.1%), drift and delay (31.9%), usually due to change over of social workers and any poor practice identified (16.5%). When alerts are initiated the concerns raised are acknowledged and responded to within the period of the next review, of the alerts initiated this year, 74.6% were responded to in timescale and 25.4% out of timescale, 3 were escalated to stage 1, Service Manager level and were resolved promptly.

The alert process has been reviewed in line with using strength-based approach (refer to paragraph 5). The principles of this new process focus on the safety and wellbeing of the child and young person being paramount. Throughout all conversations taking place between parties involved the child is central and the aim is to resolve any disagreements using a restorative approach which includes appropriate challenge and respect. There are 6 stages in the process and within the preparation for the review there is time for the IRO to have discussions with the social worker and team manager to resolve any concerns before it is progressed to stage 1. The main objective is to ensure the appropriate discussions take place in trying to resolve the concerns without the need to escalate to the next stage of the process

and to learn from the concerns to drive practice improvement and better outcomes for our looked after children.

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.

- Court Team Social Worker has been so committed and focussed throughout
- Excellent work from the Adoption and Permanence Social Worker in identifying appropriate carers for children's needs.
- Social Workers working effortlessly to meet the needs of our looked after children and ensuring they are safeguarded and protected through the last challenging year.

12. Summary and achievements in 2020/21

- During this year there have been many challenges within the team due to the corona virus pandemic including staff absences, high workloads, and inability to see children people face-to-face. However, the services continue to provide a high-quality service and to provide scrutiny, challenge, support to social work teams.
- There has been a growth in the looked after children population in Nottinghamshire over the past year, an additional IRO has been appointed to the establishment which partially meets this demand.
- IROs continue to scrutinise plans and challenge where necessary and 97.6% of reviews were held in timescales.
- Participation of children and young people at the looked after children reviews continues to be stable with majority share their wishes and views as part of the looked after children process.
- The use of technology has been embedded to hold reviews. The ambition moving forward is to have an individual approach to how meetings are held using a blended approach of face-to-face and technology.
- We have embedded a strength-based model of practice into our service. This has included developing a quality assurance framework.
- IRO lead roles have been identified and now in place, with IROs linked to different social work teams to provide quality assurance on a quarterly basis through relational based practice.
- A revised quality assurance report to improve the quality of data and thus the quality of practice and outcomes for children and families.
- IROs have completed a presentation about their role and expectations in line with the IRO handbook which will be used with new employees to Nottinghamshire, Assessed & Supported Year in Employment and other professionals.

13. Key priority areas for 2021/22

- To fully embed strength-based and restorative model of practice into our work with looked after children.
- To ensure there is a collaborative process initially working with the Children in Care Council and the young people placed in Nottinghamshire residential children's homes.
- To actively support more children and people to access independent advocates.
- To create capacity and a culture 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.
- To hold child focused reviews where the child is empowered to participate, and their voices are heard including child friendly agendas, reports, and minutes.

- To embed the concerns resolution process within children's social care and our partners whilst offering high support challenge to improve outcomes for children.
- To reinforce the quality assurance role with children social care and with our partners using an evidence-based approach.

17.05.21

Izzy Martin

Service Manager

Independent Chair Service

Safeguarding and Independent Review