

NOTTINGHAMSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

INDEPENDENT CHAIR SERVICE END OF YEAR REPORT 2011-12

1. **Introduction**

This is the annual report of the Nottinghamshire Independent Chair Service. The report covers the period from 1 April 2011 to 31 March 2012. The purpose of the report is to provide a summary of the work undertaken by the Independent Chairs and the themes that have emerged in respect of initial child protection conferences, review child protection conferences, complex strategy meetings and looked after children reviews.

2. **Context**

The Independent Chair Service (ICS) covers Nottinghamshire County and sits within the Safeguarding and Independent Review service area. The ICS is responsible for quality assuring social work practice in relation to children in public care or children involved in a child protection process and to promote effective interagency working. The Independent Chairs have continued to contribute to the development and promotion of good practice by addressing concerns regarding care planning for children, identifying areas of development and highlighting good practice.

3. **Structure and Management of the Service**

The ICS consists of Child Protection Coordinators and Independent Reviewing Officers.

The Child Protection Coordinators (CPCs) are based in specific localities within the County. However, the Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) chair reviews on children looked after across the County as well as those in external placements.

The CPCs chair all child protection conferences and complex strategy meetings. They also provide consultation to social care practitioners and staff within other agencies. The CPCs are also involved in a variety of other pieces of work outside of their core duties such as contributing to Nottinghamshire Safeguarding Children Board training.

The IROs chair all review meetings for looked after children, including those children subject to short breaks who meet the definition of being looked after.

The role of all the chairs is to ensure that appropriate plans are in place for all children who are looked after or subject to a child protection plan and to scrutinise and challenge if the needs of the children are not being met or plans are not progressed in a timely manner.

The ICS is now managed by two Service Managers. Following the previous service manager leaving in August 2011, an interim service manager has been in post. This was complemented by the appointment of a permanent full-time Service Manager in March 2012.

Staffing

At the beginning of 2011/12 the establishment for the service was 5.5 IROs and 5.5 CPCs.

In April 2011 an additional investment of 3 CPC and 5.5 IRO posts was secured to reflect the increase in the number of looked after children April 2011 (702) to March 2012 (812).

The numbers of children subject to a child protection plan decreased between April 2011 (796) and March 2012 (729). However there was a significant increase in August 2011 when the numbers of children subject to protection plans reached a peak of (905). This resulted in the use of additional agency staff.

In order to ensure posts were filled it has been necessary to use agency staff throughout this period whilst undertaking recruitment.

Recruitment

During the last year there have been 3.5 IROs recruited and 2 CPCs. Further recruitment will be taking place during the year 2012/13 to fill the remaining 4.5 vacancies within the service (1 IRO and 3.5 CPCs). The plan is to recruit experienced and qualified staff who are skilled to chair a combination of meetings.

As part of the recruitment in April 2012 a young person was included on the interview panel who is a member of the Children in Care Council and they composed a number of questions for the candidates' interview. Both the young person and the candidates found the involvement of the young person on the interview panel to be very valuable.

Business Support

The CPCs are supported by 19 full-time equivalent (FTE) minuting staff to support the production of minutes from conferences and complex strategy meetings. The minute takers are based in 3 localities across the County.

Given the significant increase in initial and review conferences in 2010/11, it proved to be a challenge to achieve the timescale for completion of minutes within 24 hours. In response to this additional agency staff were employed and subsequently there has been an improvement in the timeliness of the completion of minutes.

The IROs are supported by 3 full-time and 1 part-time administrative workers who are based in the Mansfield area.

The amount of work undertaken by the IRO admin has increased due to the distribution of LAC Review minutes becoming centralised as a result of minutes not being sent in a timely manner.

4. **Transformation project**

During the year the Children's Social Care transformation programme commenced. The focus of the programme was to implement, improve and change the service into a more sustainable model that will be cost effective and also improve outcomes for children.

One of projects that are part of the transformation programme is the review of the ICS. The focus of the project was to promote the effectiveness of the quality assurance aspect of the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) and the Child Protection Coordinator (CPC) roles. It also sought to raise the profile of the ICS and the consistency and quality of the service itself.

Two focus groups were held in September 2011 which involved staff from the externally commissioned consultants meeting separately with the IROs and the CPCs. Within the focus groups the Chairs were able to identify the key challenges and strengths for the service. As a result of this project, a clear vision for the service will be developed together with a range of actions to promote 3 main areas.

- Provide a robust quality assurance function to drive practise improvements
- Raise the profile of the ICS service so the wider CSC and partner agencies have a better understanding of the significance of the role
- Increase participation /engagement of young people, parents and carers in meetings.

5. **Overview of Workloads**

IROs

The IROs are committed to fulfilling their core functions and responsibilities as described in the IRO Handbook which was implemented in April 2011. The IRO Handbook recommends a caseload of 50-70 cases per chair. During the year caseloads for some IROs has exceeded this but continued attention is given to overseeing workloads in order to maximise the ability of IROs to meet the wider expectations of their role contained within the IRO Handbook. The aim is to equalise the caseloads of all IROs.

As indicated in the previous annual report, other methods of support were considered as a means to try and reduce the pressures of completing minutes of meetings with the IROs. A digital pen was piloted but was found to be unproductive and time consuming for the IROs.

A 'Tough book' has been piloted for one worker to use during reviews; however this also proved to be problematical as there were issues around maintaining a signal and access due to the amount of travel involved within and outside the County.

6. Workflow

Timeliness of LAC reviews

The issue around the timeliness of LAC reviews is being closely monitored by the service managers and currently a manual exercise is being undertaken to gain a better understanding of the differences between Framework reporting on this and what is recorded by the IRO admin. The aim is to increase the timeliness of reviews and ensure the recording of episodes is undertaken in a timely manner.

Our aim is to strive to achieve 100% for the completion of LAC reviews within timescale. However some of the contributors to this not being achieved are:

- ∇ increased workload in social work teams, which has led on occasion to cases not being allocated in a timely manner and also numerous changes of agency Social Workers which can create inconsistency with the progress of cases
- ∇ late requests being made to IRO admin for initial reviews, which has led to additional pressure in allocating cases in a timely manner. It has been evident of late that these requests are made within a few days of the review being required and sometimes Social Workers not being aware of the process. The Service Managers are addressing this with fieldwork service managers and this will be outlined in the quarterly quality report.
- ∇ the high caseloads of the IROs leading to difficulties at times in being able to offer an IRO to chair a review in the required timescales has been an issue in the past but with the introduction of weekly allocation meetings the likelihood of this happening has reduced
- ∇ there has been a reliance on the minutes being sent to locality admin teams for circulation. This has proved to be problematical as the minutes have not been delivered in a timely manner and has led to complaints being made.

Dual status cases

(Defined as children subject of Child Protection Plan and also accommodated)

During August 2011, following an Ofsted inspection, the numbers of dual status cases were highlighted as a concern which at the time was 71 children.

Number of dual status cases in 2011

September	October	November	December
52	37	23	31

An improvement action plan was devised by the Service Managers for the ICS. The aim of the action plan was to reduce the dual status numbers safely and to ensure that children were not subject to dual status for lengthy periods of time. The focus was “one child one plan” to reduce duplication and create more efficiency regarding professionals having to attend multiple meetings. This involved ensuring that in supervision all children subject to dual status were discussed and ensuring a timescale was identified for moving to a single plan when appropriate.

The IROs and CPCs have worked closely together by having regular case discussions about how the review meetings/conferences should be conducted and when a single plan should be made in respect of each dual status case. Discussions were held about convening earlier child protection conferences/reviews if necessary to consider a single plan. The expectation is that the safeguarding needs could be addressed in a LAC review and the IRO and the CPC come to an agreement about when the child protection plan can be removed.

The current figures for dual status as of January 2012 are 20 which indicate a significant reduction since the successful implementation of the action plan in October 2011. The cases that are dual status for a period of 3 months or more have been closely monitored by the Service Managers to ensure that children are not subject to dual plans for prolonged periods of time.

7. Participation of Young People in Reviews

During 2011 Sue Hollingsworth-Shaw, Co-ordinator for Youth Services, was commissioned along with Beverley Allison, IRO, and representatives of the Children and Care Council to revise the current ‘Listen to Me’ document. The revision of the ‘Listen to Me’ document underpins one of the actions identified by Nottinghamshire’s LAC Strategy, which is a joint statement of intent with partner agencies to work together to deliver the best outcomes possible for the children who come into local authority care.

Sue Hollingsworth-Shaw and Beverley Allison consulted with other local authorities: Tower Hamlets, Derby City and Derby County, to consider the style of their consultation documents. Following this a group of young people worked on the text for the booklet which links to the content of The Pledge and another group of young people worked on the art work with a young artist.

The young people from the CIC Council were involved in the making of The Pledge which is a list of promises made by Nottinghamshire County Council to its Looked After Children and Young People. The vision for the LAC Strategy is underpinned by The Pledge which was developed in consultation with over 200 children. The young people then told the Local Authority how they felt improvements could be made to their experience within the care system.

The ‘Listen to Me’ document for 11-18 year olds was completed during the summer 2012 and is ready for circulation. The document for 5-11 year olds has also been revised with the consultation of children and young people over the

summer period and it is expected that these will be ready for circulation very soon.

The IRO service continues to ensure that all children/young people who become looked after are sent a copy of the 'Listen to Me' consultation booklet prior to their initial review, as well as being sent a copy of The Pledge.

LAC Reviews

In some cases the IRO is the most consistent professional in a child/young person's life in care. Children and young people often have the same IRO from the point of becoming looked after to exiting care. They may also have previously been the allocated IRO for other children in the same family and are able to bring a wealth of knowledge and sensitivity to specific cases. The IROs are also conscious that as part of the IRO Handbook they are required to meet with children prior to their reviews, to encourage two-way participation and to make this as meaningful as possible to young people.

Dispute Resolution/Alert Form System

The IRO Alert and Dispute Resolution Process for addressing practice and other concerns were implemented across the County in 2009. Since this time if the IRO identifies any practice or other concerns during the review or preparation process for the review then they will make contact with the operational manager and record the concerns on the Alert Form.

The receiving manager has a maximum of 10 working days to respond to the Alert Form.

A member of the IRO admin team is responsible for ensuring that each completed Alert Form is entered onto the child/young person's file and tracking the timescales. An electronic database has been set up to monitor and track completion of Alert Forms.

If the issues of concern are not resolved at the Alert stage, then the IRO proceeds to Stage 1 of the formal dispute resolution process, which involves the Service Manager for the IRO service becoming involved in dispute resolution by escalating matters to the Service Manager.

All Team Managers are aware of this process and as part of the ICS action plan this will be reviewed and consideration will be given to whether there needs to be any changes to reflect the changes within the fieldwork service due to the transformation programme which took place during December 2012.

During 2010-2011, 29 Alerts were sent and for 2011-2012 the number was 31 in total, noting there has been little difference.

The IROs seek to resolve issues of concern as quickly and effectively as possible and at the lowest level of the dispute resolution process. Therefore this may contribute to there being very little change in the figures.

IROs will often seek out the Team Manager following an Alert being sent to try to resolve the concerns quickly and to discuss the concerns face to face. It is felt that Team Managers will need to be reminded of the process and requirement to respond in a timely manner as this does not always occur which can lead to the Service Manager being contacted to resolve. Alerts are completed for a number of reasons, however generally it is in relation to the lack of progress on a plan or if the IRO challenges aspects of the care plan on the basis that the needs of the child are not being met.

8. **Professional Development of the Independent Chairs**

The Independent Chairs role is a specialist role and CPCs and IROs work very independently which can result in some level of isolation. In response to this dedicated time has been made available to give the ICS an opportunity to share practise, update themselves on research and to discuss cases or themes. The development mornings take place four times a year. In addition to this there are joint business CPC and IRO meetings that are also held four times per year. The meetings are seen as beneficial for the Chairs ongoing professional development.

9. **Achievements**

Staffing – although a number of vacancies remain in the service 2 full-time permanent CPCs have been successfully recruited to the service and 2.5 IROs. The service also has a permanent full-time Service Manager

Dual status – the numbers of children subject to dual status has reduced and remained stable for the last six months

Joint CPC /IRO meetings – the Chairs now have meetings together four times per year

Quality Assurance – in contrast to 2010/11 the Independent Chairs have been able to focus on the quality assurance work and re-establish links with social care in providing feedback

Reflective Practise – the development mornings provide an opportunity for the team to reflect on their practise which had been a challenge previously due to workload pressures.

10. **Key areas for development 2012/13**

- Transformation Project – finalise and implement the action plan arising from the Project, once agreed by the Transformation Board

- Revise the Listen to Me consultation documents for 5-11 and 11-18 year olds in conjunction with the Children in Care Council
- Review the use of the My Protection Plan document to promote more consistent use
- Develop the use of tracker proformas to ensure that minutes of LAC reviews, child protection conferences and strategy meetings are disseminated in a timely way
- Ensure that recording on Frameworki enables accurate reporting of timeliness of LAC reviews
- Review the feedback methodologies used by the Independent Chairs to promote consistency and appropriate challenge
- Revisit the IRO and CAFCASS protocol to develop a stronger working relationship between the two disciplines
- Continue to explore possibilities for IROs to seek independent legal advice, e.g. possibility of reciprocal arrangement between Nottingham City and Nottinghamshire
- Continue to review workloads of Independent Chairs in the light of increased numbers of LAC/children with child protection plans to allow for the quality assurance aspects of their roles
- To strengthen the link between social work teams and the Independent Chair Service by having lead Chairs to link with the teams that will be in place following the reconfiguration of Children's Social Care
- The Service Managers to re-establish completing quarterly thematic reports for Operational Management Team and highlight any issues for external services and raise as appropriate
- Develop further guidance for social workers on processes relating to invitations to conferences and preparation prior to meetings
- Independent Chairs to provide briefings to social work teams on areas of improvement for practise
- IROs/CPCs to take lead role in promoting a single review process for children and young people
- Engage in trials of electronic devices for the production and distribution of minutes.
- Develop proformas for feedback from service users, social workers and partner agencies.

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