

NOTTINGHAMSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL
Annual Report of Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Service
April 2018 – March 2019

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 (CPC) 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. The IRO is central to ensuring the care plan in place meets the needs of each individual child whilst overall achieving good outcomes for all looked after children. 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 2017-2018 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) is now positioned in the Commissioning and Resources service thus improving greater independence for the service. During 2018 the IRO team experienced a high level of sickness which proved to be quite challenging in maintaining a consistent and robust service to the children and young people of Nottinghamshire. Given the challenges, the group has remained steady with just two members of staff leaving; one relocated to another area and another was redeployed due to long-term sickness. Recruitment has taken place and new members are receiving support from a mentor to learn the role of the IRO and expectations.
- 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. Due to the high level of sickness during last year caseloads have exceeded 70 with some carrying cases in the range of 80-85. When new staff have been introduced to the service, their caseload takes time to increase whilst they are being inducting into the role and develop the skills/responsibilities required. 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 on gender, age, sexuality, ethnicity and cultural backgrounds. Despite the challenges, IROs have continued to provide consultation and share their expertise with social workers and managers around care planning for the children and young people they review. The role of the IRO is seen as significant with those children who have been looked after for many years and can be the most long standing professional relationship they experience.
- 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. Due to the high level of sickness within the team over this period IROs have struggled to give time to their lead roles although have attended relevant meetings. IROs have regular supervision along with group supervision sessions with colleagues and have used this opportunity to discuss cases where children and young people are 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:

Local Family Justice Board- An IRO attends quarterly meetings with representatives from social work teams from the county and city, court personnel, CAFCASS and legal representatives. The focus is on improving practice and reducing the length and time of care proceedings in public law and increasing the efficiency of private law cases in order to improve outcomes for children and young people. The IRO has also attended the annual 'Voice of the Child' conference of the young people's board which promotes the participation

of children and young people who are or have been subject to care proceedings. The Family Justice Young People's Board (FJYPB) is a group of over 50 children and young people aged between seven and 25 years old who live across England and Wales. All of the members have either had direct experience of the family justice system or have an interest in children's rights and the family courts.

The annual conference is attended by children and young people and a broad range of 200 delegates of agencies, professionals, voluntary groups, charities, foster carers etc who are involved in delivering services to children and young people. A young person from Nottinghamshire is involved after applying to join the local board last year. At the conference handouts are available prepared by the young people.

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 also has links with the transition team and works with the group to ensure timely transition planning for each young person involved.

Youth Justice Service (YJS) - IRO meets with manager four times a year where each discuss developments within their respective services.

The manager will discuss local and national priorities around programmes and policies aimed at addressing and reducing knife crime, sexual violence and drug use. The manager provides a point of contact should the IRO service need any advice or guidance. More broadly, many of the factors that influence young people involved within the criminal justice system also affect the Looked After Population, particularly teenagers; such as family break down, poor mental health and drug use. Therefore, it is useful and informative to be able to discuss the wider implications of all these issues.

The YJS have an important preventative role and as a number of Looked After young people are at risk of being involved with the criminal justice system this link between the IRO service and YJS is extremely useful.

Activities IROs have been involved with- Two IROs and no labels groups have been involved in producing a child friendly annual report. A draft report has been completed it is just a matter of this being presented to the no labels group and then approval to be sought through the Children and Care Council. A couple of IROs attended the Looked After Children Event in February where the Countywide team organised a family event at Holme Pierrepont, with a theme of Harry Potter. The event enabled young people and professionals to meet Youth Workers, visit stands offering support as well as having a chance to get involved with the various activities. Some young people found the attendance of their identified IROs to be positive along with sharing some of the fun activities. IROs were introduced to the Local Offer for care Leavers in March 2019 when it was launched. This offer is a clear commitment to those who have left or leaving care with continued support from local authority to enable them

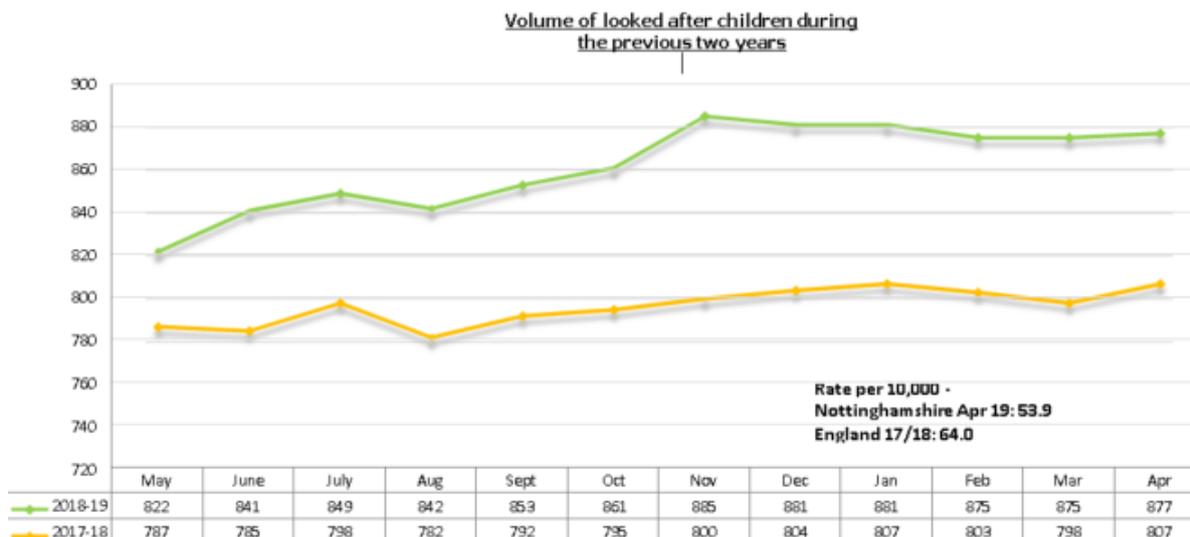
to feel safe, get the advice and help they need and developing the skills required to make a positive contribution within society. In considering the Local Offer IROs have viewed this as a positive way for young people to establish themselves as adults. Helping to underpin their future by providing financial and practical support which empowers young people to build a sustainable future.

Participation Group

One IRO and one Child Protection Coordinator are part of the steering group and the local authority has now purchased 'Mind of my own' app, which will encourage children and young people to communicate with their social worker and IROs at any point in the day. The implementation of the app is in its early stages and the steering group will continue to meet to develop this. The IRO service will be championing this app once it is functional and ready for use. There is representation from the CICC (Children in Care Council) with consultation taking place throughout the various stages of considering this app.

4. Profile of Looked After Children in Nottinghamshire

- 4.1.** At the end of March 2019, there were 875 children and young people looked after by the Local Authority (a rate of 53.9 per 10.000 children) in comparison to last year there were 798 looked after children at a rate of 49.1 per 10.000 children. This figure continues to be lower than the national average (64) and that of our statistical neighbours (61.5). The service has systems in place to identify the need for children to be looked after or cared elsewhere is addressed. Child protection coordinators have an overview of cases where children are subject to child protection plans, will escalate concerns around drift or delay, and will challenge when plans are not progressing in a timely way and consideration to alternative care and protection is required. As IROs and CPCs are part of the same service they regularly liaise with each other about children on dual plans and ensure a single plan is appropriate plan unless the children are to be rehabilitated back home. The Service Manager for the court team and the Independent Chair Service meet monthly to 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.



4.2. Of the 875 children and young people looked after at the end of March 658 were in foster care, (which comprises of 78.2% of the total LAC population) 25 children were identified as having a disability and 20 were placed outside of the county. In considering, other types of placements 102 children were placed in children’s home, 77 in other placements not identified and 1 was made subject to a secure placement. Out of the total of 875 children 30 (7.2%) of LAC population) were placed for adoption.

4.3. When considering the age profile of the children who became looked after in Nottinghamshire over the past year 63% were between the ages of 0-11 years, 37% made up the LAC population of 12-18 year olds at the end of March 2018. Of the total number of young people, accommodated 58% were male and 42% female, this figure is not dissimilar to that of 2108/19.

4.4. When considering the legal status of children and young people who became looked after this year the majority where initially accommodated under section 20 of the Children Act 1989 (55%). Section 20 accommodation is agreed with the parents and 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 3 months stage in order 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 parent’s then consideration is given to initiating a Legal Planning Meeting. Of the 370 children becoming looked after during the year 136 (36%), were subject to care proceedings 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 2018/19, there has been a high number of children returning to the care of their parents (66), with young people progressing onto Independent Living being (79) and 33 children being made subject to a Special Guardianship Order. 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 2308 reviews were chaired by IROs in the year ending of March 2019, (this is a significant increase from the year before where 1805 reviews were held) of these 96.4% of these were held in timescale, which is a similar percentage from last year. The performance indicator NI66 which 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 was 91.9% which continues to remain within target.

5.2 At the point of children and young people becoming looked after, (370 in total) for the year of 2018/19 51% were due to neglect and abuse which is a slight increase from last year of 47%. Other factors involved family dysfunction, absent parenting and family in acute stress featured highly 31%. IROs have noted there has been a number of positive interventions undertaken by the family service, to support children returning to the care of their family with a good plan of support.

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 2018/9 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, the child/young person attending the review meeting or part of their meeting has remained consistently around 45%. Of those who did not attend, 5-6% they asked an advocate to speak for them or 44% 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. IROs continue to offer support to those young people confident enough to chair or co-chair their own review. IROs consult with the young people to establish how their views can be heard and how they want to contribute to their review.

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.

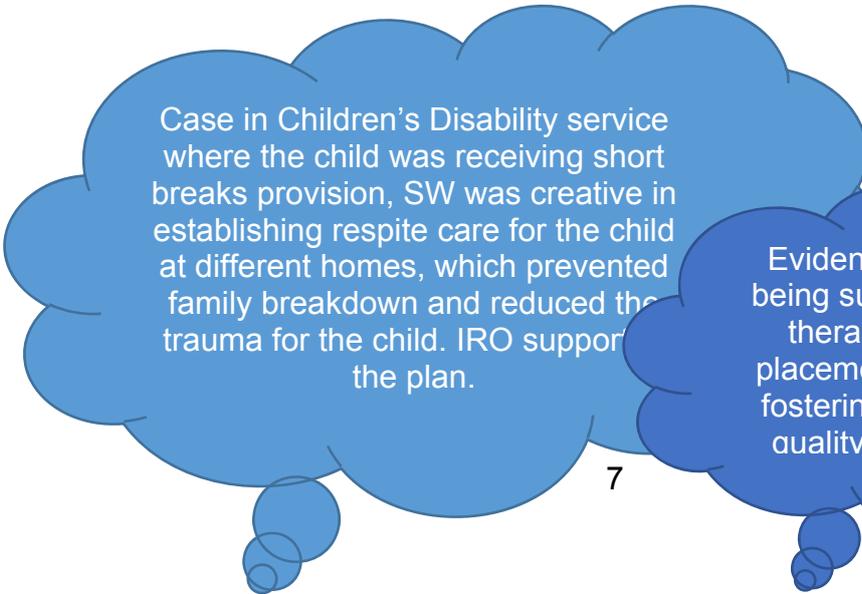
7.2 When the IRO identifies any issues around care planning they will seek to resolve the issue informally with the social worker, their manager or with the agency involved. The informal stage of the process is usually recorded on the child's file however this data has not been available to the service this year, as it is vital for the IRO to demonstrate they have taken up informal discussions a new case note is being introduced in order to collate this information. During the year 68 alerts were however initiated by IROs on a formal basis to Social Care practitioners, data suggests there has been a slight increase in the number of alerts initiated (55 in 17/18 and 68 in 16/17). The themes that have emerged from the alerts relate to a range of issues; Lack of clear plan in respect of child, drift and delay usually due to change over of social workers, any poor practice identified about any agency involved which occurs rarely and not ensuring the child/young person has not been consulted as part of the LAC review process. When alerts are initiated the concerns raised are acknowledged and responded within the period of the next review.

7.3 What is evident from the alerts initiated during 2018/19 only 8 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 as all have been acted upon and resolved satisfactorily by the teams involved. The IRO is also required to initiate external alerts when there are individual concerns about partner agencies contribution and delay in achieving good outcomes for the child/young person. From the IROs, feedback there continues to be good multi-agency working and any concerns raised about practice or delay have been addressed informally at the time. IROs have not needed to initiate alerts formally, as the matters raised were resolved immediately.

7.4 IROs acknowledge good practice by sending an email to the social Workers team manager.

Below are some examples and quotes from IROs:

- SW is an outstanding worker; consistently her reports are thorough, very detailed and she demonstrates that she clearly knows the children well and understands their needs. Her visits are often more than required she values spending time with the children and has a good commitment to them.

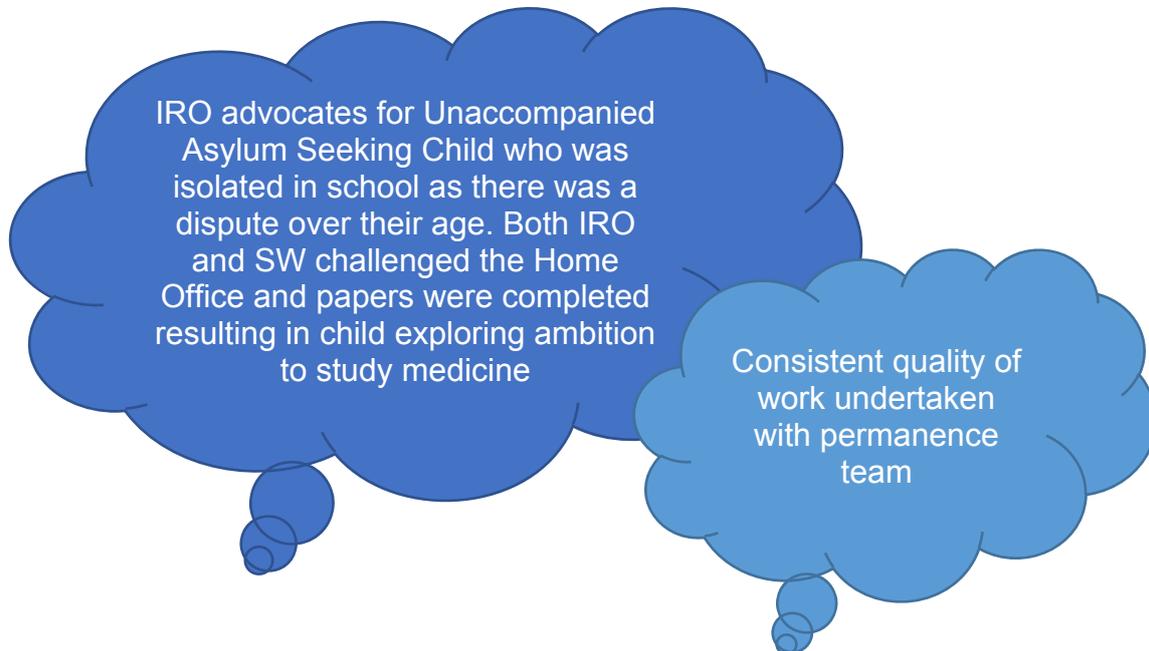


Case in Children's Disability service where the child was receiving short breaks provision, SW was creative in establishing respite care for the child at different homes, which prevented family breakdown and reduced the trauma for the child. IRO supported the plan.



Evidence of children being supported within therapeutic foster placements. Excellent fostering support and quality of thera-play

- SW met two siblings for the first time just before the review; they have said they really like their social worker and they even told school. The two girls really don't want Social Care involved at all. This is credit to a very good social worker.



- IRO commented they were impressed by SWs Pathway Plan for Child A, clearly they were well involved in developing this. SW has formed a good relationship with Child A who is not always easy to engage with, she knows them well and they contact her if they need support which is very positive. Her commitment to Child A is very good.

8. Examples of good permanency outcomes

During 2018/19, the IROs focus on the permanency needs of children and young people at every review undertaken. Throughout the year, children and young people looked after achieved permanence by:

66 returning to the care of their parents.

33 children becoming subject to a Special Guardianship Order, of which foster carers for the children they cared for secured some.

32 children were adopted.

9. 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 and as a group have addressed many topics of mutual interest over the past year, which has included personnel from Social Work England, research undertaken on Child Sexual Abuse, CAFCASS (Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service) protocol and Contextual Safeguarding. During October and February, the group developed NIROMP's Priorities and Vision for 2019-22, each area has taken a

lead from the four main priorities with Nottinghamshire focussing on the 'Voices of children'.

10. Learning and development

Over the past 5 years seminars have been held which has involved IROs from the nine local authorities within the region, a training group comprising of some regional managers enlist speakers to deliver topics of interest. This continues to be a valuable opportunity in respect of IROs sharing their own experiences and offering suggestions with new developments. The offer has now extended to the Child Protection Coordinators within the region and this has meant the number entitled to attend has placed a strain on the ability to deliver to a much bigger group. The training group try to facilitate seminars which incorporates similar challenges and of interest to children and young people looked after and subject to a child protection plan. The topics over the past year have been; challenges for IROS around care proceedings and advocacy, peer on peer sexual abuse, safeguarding of young children from pre-birth and quality assurance and role of the chairs. Case studies continue to be integrated within the seminars and is found to be best vehicle for learning and sharing own practice. These sessions are extremely valuable and effective in cementing good working relationships across the region.

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

11.1 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. On receiving feedback the vast majority report that they feel welcomed by IRO, felt respected by them, had time to share information, views and opinions and had a clear understanding of the care plan and the decisions and recommendations made at the end of the review.

The additional comments highlighted that the IRO;

- Is honest and open
- Informal tone so feel able to contribute
- Very approachable and welcoming
- Valued the importance of established and long term relationships

11.2 The Local Authority has commissioned the 'Mind of your own' app which is to be rolled out to gain feedback from children and young people, the IRO will look at how this can be introduced and respond to any suggestions for improvement.

12. Key findings

- It has been a challenging year for the IRO service although practice continues to be positive with good multi-agency working
- Reviews continue to show a good level of child participation and evidence of the voice of the child
- LAC reviews have continued to remain within normal range of timeliness
- IROs have worked hard to maintain consistency due to the high level of sickness within the team over the last year

- IROs are attending events for looked after children and supporting those who offer activities
- Alerts initiated are appropriate and are resolved in a timely manner with good results for the children and young people involved
- IROs continue to attend regional seminars and have welcomed the additional input from the Child Protection Coordinators.

Progress on last year's priorities

- Child friendly report to be shared for consideration with CICC
- Child Protection Coordinators are now part of the regional seminars
- Nottinghamshire are taking the lead with priorities from national group
- IRO manager will be attending Care Leavers partnership from July
- Informal alerts will now be captured through new case note type
- Piloting of reviews for young people leaving to progress.

Areas for focus during 2019-20

- Explore use of technology in the LAC review process and ensure engagement of young people with this
- Pilot the provision of reviews for young people leaving care
- Fostering IROs to come under the management of the service
- Monitor the implementation of IRO case note types allowing for reporting on informal alerts
- IRO service manager to attend LAC and Care leavers Strategic Partnership Board
- IROs to monitor the Local Offer for care leavers and ensure it is addressing their needs
- Produce the new child friendly annual report and evaluate with young people its benefits
- Focus to be given on IROs to develop their lead roles.
- Nottinghamshire to take the lead on behalf of national group on the priority focusing on the 'Voice of Children'
- Undertake some quality assurance activity to explore efficacy of IRO service.

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 Independent Chair Service
 03.06.19