



From Strength to Strength

NOTTINGHAMSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL
Annual Report of Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Service
April 2019 – March 2020

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

The Independent Chair Service (ICS) in Nottinghamshire is part of the Safeguarding and Independent Review Service, it is positioned in the Commissioning and Resources service thus improving greater independence. 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.

2.Purpose and legal context

Since 2004 all local authorities have been required to appoint Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) 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 monitors and reviews each child’s case and ensures their current wishes and feelings are given full consideration and where necessary challenge 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 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 2019/20 is 14 (full time equivalent) and the team is currently up to full capacity. There has also been an increase in service manager cover to 2.5 FTE posts. 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 steady growth of the looked after population over the past two years IROs in Nottinghamshire have had responsibility for the care plans of over 70 children and young people and sometimes as high as 75-80. 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. 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.

IROs participate in the regional seminars that have been in existence for the past 5 years, these involve facilitators from each local authority presenting specific topics around looked after children and occur four times a year. This enables IROs to reflect upon their own practice, meet up with other colleagues within the region and share good practice. As one of the managers of the Independent Chair Service I chair the regional managers network and also participate in the national group which meets quarterly in London. The regional group meets quarterly and considers any work being undertaken within the region and nationally in respect of the IRO role and its impact on looked after children. The main emphasis is on trying to create consistency nationally and regionally whilst maintaining an individual identity and purpose as a local authority.

IROs are committed to developing themselves and have specialisms/lead roles which enables them to develop specialist knowledge which is shared with colleagues and social workers and creates good working networks with other agencies when striving to achieve good outcomes for looked after children. Over the past two years the service has experienced a high level of absence within the team and this has impacted on the IROs ability to consistently deliver training/mentoring/attend meetings/forums around their specialisms and adhere to the roles and responsibilities as illustrated within the IRO Handbook. The IROs have regular individual and group supervisions with colleagues and use this as reflection time on practice and 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 IROs have a direct relationship with CAFCASS, and can if required refer matters of concern to them; however, this year there has been no cause to refer anything. Once care proceedings are initiated the Guardian and IRO communicate regularly as part of the looked after process to share views on the care plan and to ensure assessments are being progressed in time. Also, twice a year we hold IRO/CAFCASS workshops which provide an opportunity to share good practice examples.

4.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. 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.

Local authorities have a legal duty to make advocacy arrangements for children who wish to make a complaint about health and social care services for children who are detained under the Mental health Act or 16- and 17-year olds who lack mental capacity. The current advocacy service for looked after children in Nottinghamshire and Nottingham City has been provided as a joint contract by an external provider since April 2014. The service provides issue-based advocacy available on referral, regular planned visits to looked after children placed in residential accommodation, weekly visits to Clayfields secure children's home, an Independent visitor service who provides volunteers to befriend and spend time with children and young people and an independent person to sit on review secure panels.

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

Total number of reviews held	2018-19 21821	2019-20 2280
Definition of participation	% of total reviews	% of total reviews
Child under 4 at time of review	NA	NA
Child attends and speaks for themselves	40.1	42.0
Child attends and an advocate speaks for them	1.0	0.5
Child attends and conveys their views non-verbally	0.2	0.1
Child attends; does not speak for themselves/convey their views	0.4	0.6
Child does not attend but asks advocates to speak for them	5.3	4.2
Child does not attend but conveys their feelings to the review	44.1	45.2
Child does not attend nor convey their views to the review	6.0	5.4

The picture around participation continues to be consistent and stable with 41.3 (at end of 2019) and 42.6 (at end of 2020) 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 2019) and 49.4 (at end of 2020) ask an advocate to speak on their behalf or convey their feelings to the review. Of those who did not participate through their own choice, 6.0 (at end of 2019) and 5.4 (at end of 2020) 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.

With the introduction of the MOMO app IROs continue to encourage children and young people to use as a means of conveying their views. The MOMO app was launched in 2019, it creates tools that 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.



102 one app statements have been sent by different children in care (some of which have sent in multiple statements). These children and young people

were aged between 7-18 with the most common being sent by 11-14-year olds. The statements included: worker visits, preparation, to share good news and to sort a problem.

IROs continue to encourage young people to chair/co-chair their own review with their own agendas where appropriate. Although there is a limited number of young people who feel confident enough to chair their own review, we hope that this will increase once we have remodelled the way reviews will be conducted and how the record is produced in the future.

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 (CICC) 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. Over the last year IROs have consulted with the CICC about the way looked after reviews are recorded and their views on producing a shorter record of what was discussed. Young people at the time were not keen, however we would like to revisit this proposal and explore further with young people around looking at alternative ways of producing a record that is acceptable and accessible to children and young people. This would enable IROs to visit children in between reviews more and undertake more quality assurance work on recommendations and care plans between each review.

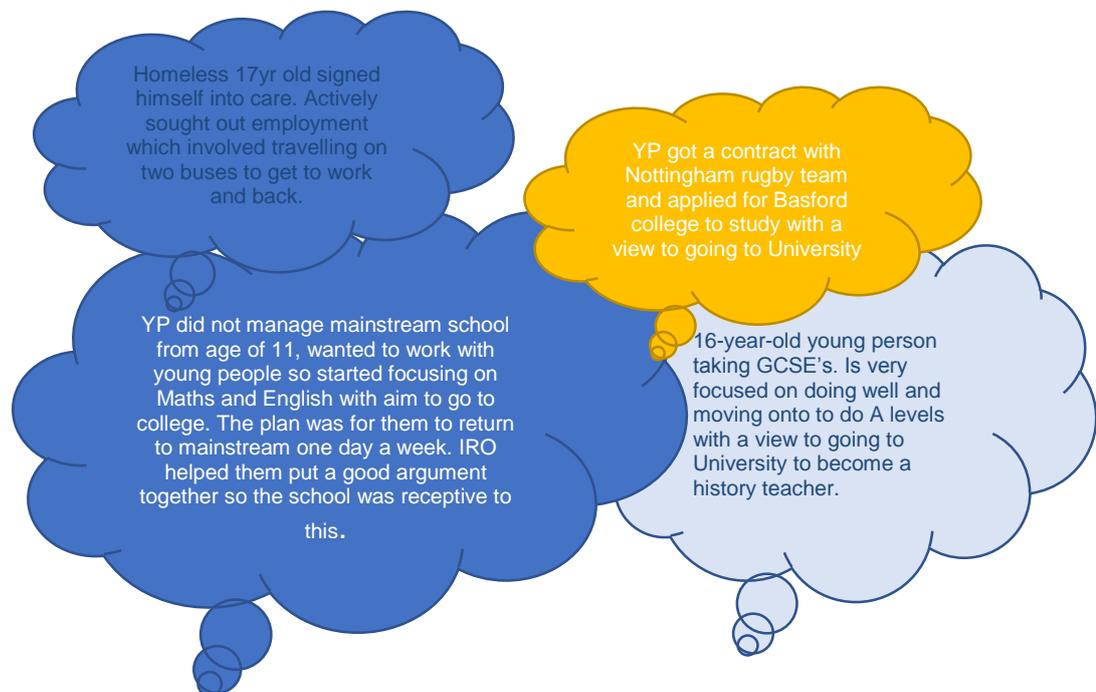
Our service took a proposal to CICC about completing two films, one for younger children and one for young people. These films would provide children and young people with an easy to understand and authentic insight into who is involved in their care and how they will be supported when they become looked after. 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. This project has not been progressed due to Covid19, however it is intended that some work will progress to complete one clip at a time in order to develop the film over the next 6 months.

5. Achievements in 2019/20

- IROs use of technology has increased somewhat since Covid 19, they have adapted well to using skype as a means of holding reviews remotely and have reported a good attendance from agencies and young people.
- The provision of reviews for young people who have left care has shown some success and is going to be offered to all care leavers.
- Fostering IROs are now placed in the Independent Chair Service, they are managed by one manager and continue to work independently focusing on Foster Care Reviews.
- IRO case note types have been developed on Mosaic allowing for reporting on informal alerts
- Service Manager ICS attendance at the LAC and Care Leavers Strategic Partnership Board allows progress on action plan to be shared with the IROs
- IROs continue to monitor the Local Offer for care leavers and this has been received well by young people.
- The child friendly annual report was shared with the CICC and they were pleased with the draft version and were happy for this to be produced for 2019/20

- IROs lead roles have been identified but not in full force due to additional pressures of covering absence within the service.
- Nottinghamshire has taken the lead on behalf of the national IRO managers group focusing on the 'Voice of Children', work is underway but has stalled due to Covid 19
- The quality assurance activity and how this is captured by IROs has not progressed and it is hoped this will take priority in the next year.
- During this year there have been many challenges within the team due to staff absences, vacant posts, high caseloads and an increase in admin tasks. However the service has continued to provide a high quality service and to provide scrutiny, challenge and support to social work teams.
- IRO's used for consultation by Team Managers, SW's, other agencies, Guardians on multi-agency discussions for young people.
- IROs build a bridge between all agencies and explore resolutions in situations where conflict may arise with families.
- IROs provide regular constructive feedback on social work practice, contribute to AYSE progression reports and annual reviews of foster carers.

6. Achievements of children and young people



7. Nottinghamshire Children and Young People Data 2019/2020

At the end of March 2019, Nottinghamshire had responsibility for 923 looked after children and young people (a rate of 56.8 per 10.000 children) in comparison to last year there were 875 looked after children at a rate of 53.9 per 10.000 children. When considering the age groups of admissions as in previous years there are more boys 198 (54.7) than girls 164 (45.3) who become looked after, this closely resembles figures nationally.

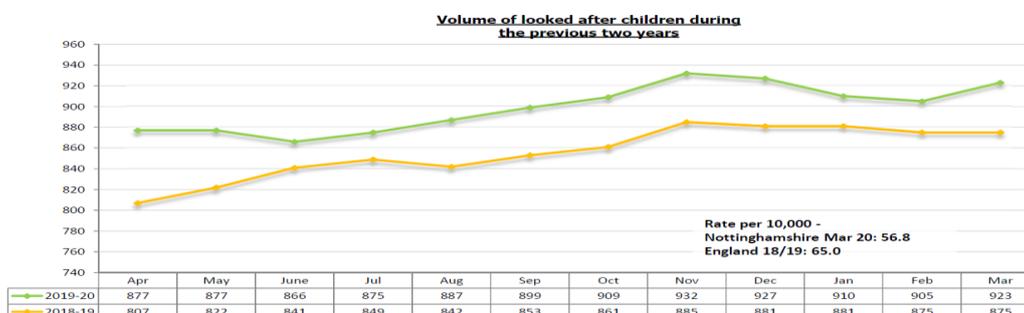
Age groups of admissions during 2019/20



There has been a notable rise in the number of 16-17 yr olds (21.5%) of those accommodated by IROs this past year. Breakdown in family relations is the most common reason and a small number have presented as homeless and in need of accommodation. This also represents a change in government legislation placing a statutory responsibility to offer all homeless 16 and 17 year olds the option of becoming looked after. If a return home is not possible IROs ensure these young people are well supported in identifying whether they require semi-independent accommodation or live independently.

In the past year of the 362 accommodated with regard to ethnicity 320 (88.3%) were white, 4 (1.1%) were of Asian/Asian British, 3 (0.82%) black or black British, 21 (5.8%) mixed and 13 (3.6%) 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 923 looked after children as at 31st March 22 (2.38%) were placed with parents, 20 (2.2%) were unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and 5 (0.54%) were placed in secure unit.

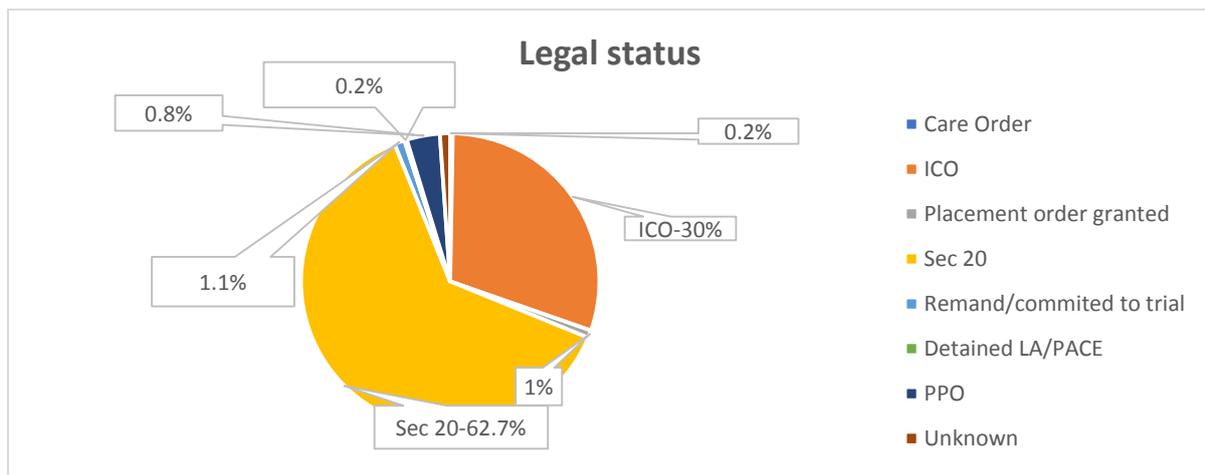
Of the 318 children and young people whom were discharged during in the year, 4 (1.25%) were sentenced to custody.

Child protection coordinators within the service have an overview of cases where children 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 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 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 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 parents then consideration is given to initiating a Legal Planning Meeting. Of the 362 children becoming looked after during the year 109 (30.1%), 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.

Legal Status of 362 children admitted into care during 2019/20



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.

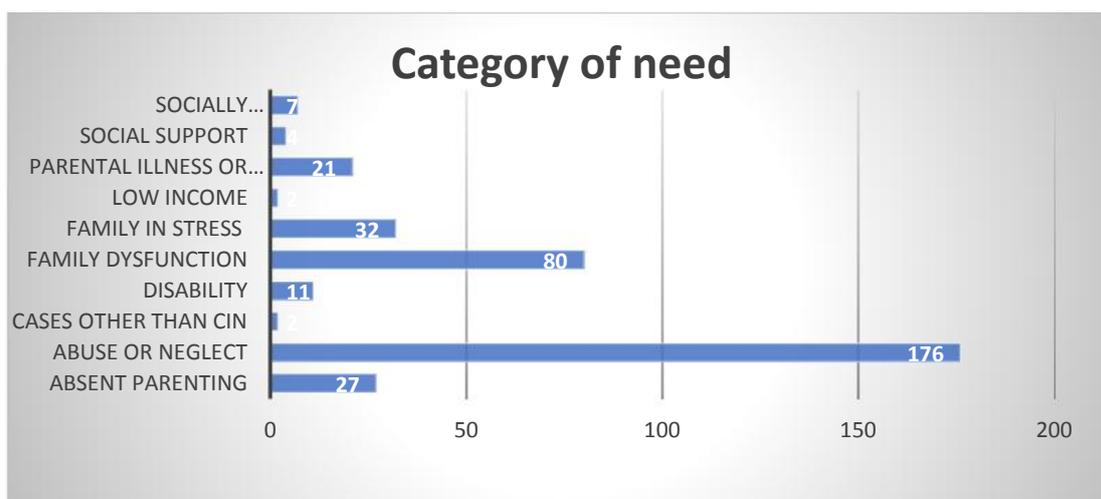
8. Our children and young people's statutory reviews-timeliness and participation

Looked After Reviews

A total of 2159 reviews were chaired by IROs in the year ending of March 2010, (this is a significant increase from the year before where 1850 reviews were held) of these 96% of these 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 362 in total for the year of 2019/20 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%.

Nottinghamshire children category of need at time of admission to care



9. Identifying good practice and Dispute 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 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 the IRO with their manager will then consider taking action by progressing to stage 1; this involves the operational service manager.

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 recorded on the child's file under 'Informal discussion with IRO', which is used regularly where issues of concern are raised with the team manager of agency and is resolved immediately. During the year 113 formal alerts were initiated by IROs with Social Care practitioners, data suggests there has been an increase in the number of alerts initiated last year. (as noted in the table below)

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

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 (11.36%), care plan not being implemented fully (11.36%), drift and delay (20.45%), usually due to change over of social workers and any poor practice identified (35.8%). 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 all were responded to within timescale by the team manager without the need to escalate to service manager level.

10. Good Social Work Practice Stories

- It was apparent the SW has a good relationship with the mother, there was a clear sense of trust from the mother to the social worker. The social worker had also

clearly advocated for mother and had fought for services to be put in place for her when the SW met resistance, she made a complaint to this service on behalf of the mother.

- Report for the review was on time and to a good standard. SW participated well throughout the review and showed a good understanding of the young person's needs. Worked well with the Social Worker who was due to take over the case and demonstrated their willingness to complete joint working sessions with them, to ensure the young person had a smooth transition to another team.
- IRO acknowledges case audit received praise from Chief Executive. Lots of good work had secured a child a very positive move to a residential home, residential provider praised the preparation undertaken by SW.
- Permanence SW & TM moved baby swiftly to prospective adopters during Covid 19
- IRO complimented Practice Consultant on their ability to manage a strong team of professionals to ensure there was a safety plan in place for a very young couple where the baby was placed back at home with them. They showed compassion and were really positive about professionals working together.
- LAC SW; always provides updates regarding risk assessments in respect of children's care plans. In one instance this allowed the IRO to talk to the Guardian to gain their views about a young person placed in secure.
- LAC SW doing some great work with a number of teenagers where joint work is undertaken with concerns around CSE, healthy relationships and keep safe work. SW working with placements to ensure strong safety plans are in place for these teenagers.
- After many years apart young person is reunited with family. SW has supported this young person through direct & life story work to understand their entry into care & subsequent separation from her family. SW has facilitated contact and more recently has made the journey with the young person to meet their birth relatives for the first time in many years. SW was able to capture some beautiful photographs which both the young person & their relatives now treasure

11. Summary

- There has been a growth in the looked after children population in Nottinghamshire over the past year
- IROs continue to scrutinise plans and challenge where necessary.
- Participation of children and young people at their LAC reviews continues to be stable with the majority sharing their wishes and views as part of the LAC process.
- Initial feedback indicates that professionals and children are responding well to reviews being undertaken by skype since mid-March when Covid 19 necessitated these different arrangements.
- It is noted there are excellent examples of work being undertaken with children and young people by their social workers which has produced some good outcomes for them
- IROs continue to develop and maintain good working relationships with partner agencies and their peers within the region
- Proposals to enrich the looked after population, (Child Friendly Report and film) introduced by ICS is being welcomed by CICC

12. Key priority areas for 2020/21

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 CICC 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.

18.05.20
Izzy Martin
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Independent Chair Service
Safeguarding and Independent Review