

NOTTINGHAMSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL
Annual Report of Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) Service
April 2016 – March 2017

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 part of the service.
- 1.2.** The IRO Handbook states that the manager of the IRO service is responsible for the production of an annual report for the scrutiny of the members of the Children and Young People’s Committee and for it to be accessible as a public document. This report will provide information and analysis regarding the activity and performance of the IRO service over the past 12 months, and identify areas for development in the coming year. Progress against actions identified in the Annual report 2015-2016 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 2010. 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.

The National Children’s Bureau (NCB) research ‘The Role of the Independent

Reviewing Officers in England' (March 2014) provides a wealth of information and findings regarding the efficacy of IRO services.

The foreword written by Mr Justice Peter Jackson; makes the following comment:

The Independent Reviewing Officer must be the visible embodiment of our commitment to meet our legal obligations to this special group of children. The health and effectiveness of the IRO service is a direct reflection of whether we are meeting that commitment, or whether we are failing.

The NCB research outlines several important recommendations with three having an influence on IROs work plan priorities:

- A. Where IROs identify barriers to their ability to fulfil their role, or systemic failures in the service to looked after children, they must raise this formally with senior managers. These challenges and the response should be included in the Annual Report.
- B. IROs method for monitoring cases and how this activity is recorded should be clarified.
- C. A review of IROs core activities and additional tasks should be undertaken. There is a need to establish whether IROs additional activities compromise independence or capacity.

3. Staffing/workload

3.1. The establishment for the IRO group is 14 (full time equivalent). During 2016 three IRO posts were filled with internal secondments and those staff have now secured a permanent position within the service and the team is now fully staffed. In order to develop the skills and knowledge of the three new workers they were mentored by more experienced IROs for a six month period. Caseloads of the IRO group has remained relatively stable with each individual IRO holding cases of 50-65 children. 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. It is important to note for the IRO to provide a meaningful service to children by overseeing their care plan they also actively attend other meetings arranged about the most vulnerable children along with holding additional reviews.

3.2. 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. For example, developing knowledge and practice with missing children, those vulnerable to CSE (Child Exploitation), with disabilities, 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:

Children Disability Service - Two IROs meet regularly with the CDS managers and discuss areas of concern and priorities for the IRO service. This involves an interactive session where the IROs attended a meeting with social workers to discuss their role and answer any questions in relation to care planning and reviews. They also attended the DOLS (Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards), information session with CDS and there is a plan to coordinate regional feedback on specific practice in relation to this subject.

Local Family Justice Board - The appointed IRO has attended all Nottinghamshire LFJB meetings this year which are held quarterly. These meetings include legal and representatives from social care from both county and city, solicitors, Judge and CAFCASS (Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service). Court timetables, research or changes in practice in public law is shared within the meeting.

Adoption - Two IROs meet quarterly with the Operational Service Manager, an interactive liaison where information regarding trends, good practice and areas for development are addressed. This has enabled the IRO service to remain informed on significant changes in adoption practice, adoption support available, the fostering to adopt service and regionalisation. The IROs communicate any known issues impacting on children awaiting adoption and anything raised at LAC reviews. The service offered by the Adoption team is viewed as excellent by the IROs and meets the needs of Nottinghamshire children.

Children in Care Council - The achievements for the past year has involved; the development and embedding of Looked After Children reports for all young people who wish to receive them.

The development of Young Person friendly Pathway Plan has been completed and is in the process of being launched (this will not replace the formal Pathway Plan but the Young Person version can be used with the YP and the information transferred to the formal copy).

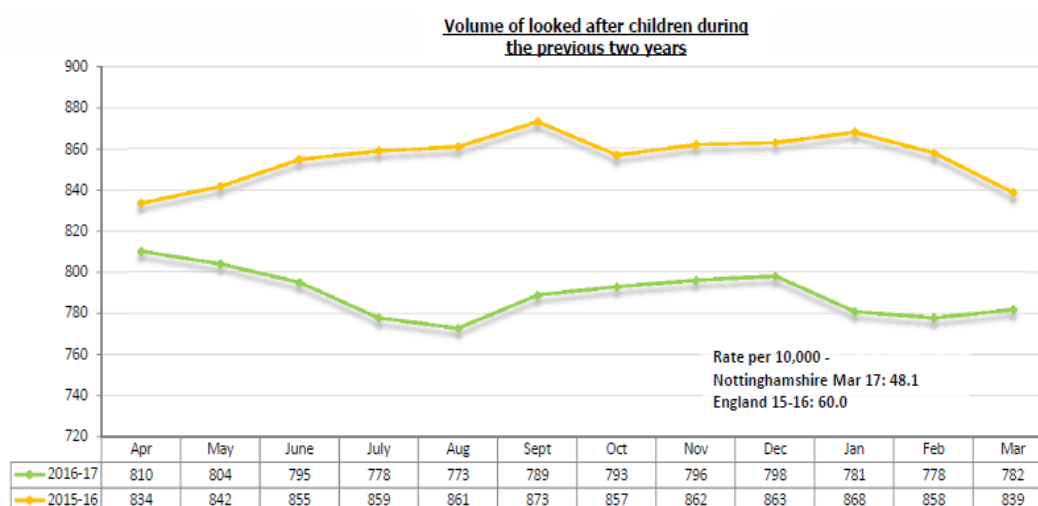
Planning and delivery of the play day (Centre Parcs) and Awards event which combined consultation opportunities between IRO and children and young people and was considered to be valuable for both. Children and Young People were reported to be interested to meeting their IRO if they had not met them before.

Foster carers meetings - The lead IRO's attendance at FLAG (Fostering Liaison Group) has given a valuable and interesting insight into diverse fostering issues and any challenges in the care they provide to Nottinghamshire children. The IRO's role is about listening to the concerns raised by foster carers along with establishing what carers have found useful at LAC reviews they attend. Concerns have ranged from differing views around support care and the impact this may have on the children they care for and the importance of them being able to make contact with the IRO. Foster carers have commented how useful it is to receive card details of the IRO and how they can be contacted in respect of any issues with the child

they are caring for.

4. Profile of Looked After Children in Nottinghamshire

4.1. At the end of March 2017, there were 782 children and young people looked after by the authority. This figure has remained relatively stable throughout this year and the previous year. This total figure includes 25 children with disabilities who are accommodated under an agreed series of short-term breaks. The looked after rate per 10,000 at the end of the year was 48.1 which remains lower than the rates for both our statistical neighbours and the England average as at the end of 2015/16 which were 59.8 and 60 respectively. When considering the differences between our statistical neighbour's audit work undertaken has confirmed that thresholds for children to become looked after are appropriate and consistently applied. In monitoring the thresholds, the role of the Child Protection Coordinator is crucial in alerting their managers if it is deemed that a child needs accommodation and the appropriate action is not occurring for this to happen. However there continues to be operational management oversight to ensure children in need of protection are accommodated in a timely way.



4.2. Of the 782 children and young people looked after at the end of March 598 were in foster care, (which comprises of 76.5% of the total LAC population) with 20 placed outside of the county, and 33 were children with a disability. In considering other placements a total of 108 children were placed in different residential settings, whilst 4 were subject to a secure placement. Out of the total of 782 children 49 (6.3% of LAC population) were placed for adoption during the year.

4.3. When considering the age profile of the children who became looked after in Nottinghamshire over the past year 21% were between the age of 1-5 years, with 21% between 6-10 years and the highest percentage 54% made up the LAC population of 11-18 year olds at the end of March 2017. Of the total number of young people accommodated 56% were male and 44% female.

4.4. Of the total number of children who became looked after this year the majority were initially accommodated under section 20 of the Children Act 1989 (66%). This means that these children were accommodated at the request of and or in agreement with parent/s or those with parental responsibility. Section 20 accommodation is intended as a short-term measure pending either a return home or the commencement of care proceedings, and these cases are now being more closely monitored by both the operational service managers and the IROs both in relation to preventing delay and ensuring informed consent by parents.

4.5. Last year the Scrutiny panel, firstly known as the Residential panel, was introduced with the purpose to scrutinise placements for children in Nottinghamshire care. The panel reviews all children in residential placements along with high cost or bespoke fostering arrangements and any changes to their plan is presented to the panel within 4 weeks.

The Service Manager for the Independent Chair Service sits on this panel with other operational service managers. The panel's focus is to ensure the placement is good value for money in meeting the young person's needs whilst confirming that the young person's care plan/pathway plan is appropriate. It is also important to ensure that the young people are being appropriately progressed onto independent living and have acquired the necessary skills to care for themselves. The IRO has a key role in ensuring the plan is focused on what skills and support the young person needs to prepare them in becoming independent.

4.6. In terms of permanency outcomes during 2016/17, there has been a high number of children returning to the care of their parents (102), with young people progressing onto Independent Living being (96) and 34 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 1947 reviews were chaired by IROs in the year ending of March 2017, of these 95.5% of these were held in timescale, which was an improvement from the end of March 2016, which was 92.2%. This performance indicator is calculated on a rolling year basis and the current figure remains below the target of 95.5%.

5.2. IROs complete some reviews in a series of meetings to ensure the relevant people are involved and the meeting remains child focused and friendly. A total number of 293 children of young people who became looked after in Nottinghamshire between April 2016 and March 2017, neglect or abuse has continued to be the main reason (46%), with family dysfunction or the family being in acute stress also featuring highly, (37%).

5.3. IROs continue to track how cases are progressing between reviews as it is important to ensure the child's care plan is progressing. IROs will

appropriately challenge or prompt social workers to ensure work is undertaken effectively, such as convening strategy meetings for those who go missing or at risk of sexual exploitation and that risk assessments on these children are up to date.

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 2016/7 children aged 4 and over are recorded to have conveyed their views in over 92% of reviews, which signifies a continued improvement.

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, 45% had the child/young person attending the review meeting or part of their meeting. 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. There are examples where young people have been supported by their IRO to either chair or co-chair their own review. IROs are creative with the young people and discuss the best ways in which they can contribute to their review. This can be illustrated in the following example:

One young person aged 16 struggled initially with attending reviews, and it was evident that the young person was finding it difficult with parents being present. At the last review the IRO decided to offer parents a separate meeting and the young person attended with the support of her key worker. The young person had their own agenda, which was incorporated into the review and was included in the record of the meeting. The young person did not want their own child friendly minutes as they were of the view they were old enough to have the full minutes.

Participants at the review managed to agree and negotiate on a plan for the YP future education, their free time in the community, access to their phone and lpad and explored how they could become more independent. The young person felt anxious at the beginning of the review, however at the end they commented they felt they had been listened to and were really happy with the plan that was agreed by all parties.

6.3. Some children or young people make informed decisions not to attend their review but will participate in other ways such as completing the 'listen to me' document, providing their views in other written or pictorial forms, or alternatively meeting with their IRO prior to the review. IROs are increasingly visiting children and young people prior to reviews, and this can include observing very young children in placement with their carers'.

6.4. The group of young people least likely to participate in their review are teenagers. IROs continue to consider creative ways in exploring how to

communicate with those who do not attend or present their views for the review. The following example illustrates positive ways in which the IRO has include the young person in their review:

With the assistance of the IRO a 15 year old put together a PowerPoint presentation and then showed it to the participants at the review whilst talking thorough each slide which contained information about the young person's needs, everyday life, contact with birth family and ambitions for the future. As part of this process the young person has moved away from saying what they dislike about their parents to discussing their own life and the future. This is an example of a couple of the slides they created to convey their views.

Welcome to my PowerPoint! I hope you enjoy this as we go through different topics ☐

- Oh and I hope you enjoy your cakes and coffee as well.
- Right lets jump into it!!
- I have now got a national insurance number and I am filling it out to send back.
- I have also got a bank card, well a savings card but I still have a pin on it and I can still go to a cash machine and withdraw money from it. My budget is £10 and £10 only which is a fair amount of money anyway.
- But yeah I'm totally buzzing about that right now

7. 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. During the year 68 alerts on 86 children were initiated by IROs to Social Care practitioners, which is a significant reduction from the 91 alerts the previous year. The themes that emerge from alerts largely relate to concerns regarding care planning; drift and delay in respect of recommendations not being completed from the previous review, assessments not being completed in a timely manner where a decision is needed to progress the care plan. During this past year, the service has moved onto record alerts differently and are now part of the young person's electronic record. The reduction of alerts indicates care plans are being progressed in a timely way, we are also aware that IROs are also resolving issues informally with team managers without it needing to be escalated to a formal alert. However further work will be undertaken by the ICS managers to ensure alerts are being initiated appropriately throughout the coming year.

- 7.3.** In relation to outcomes, there were no alerts this year that were escalated above stage 1- service manager level. External alerts are also considered with IROS when there are individual concerns about partner agencies and when there is any delay in contributing to achieve good outcomes for the child/young person. There have been a couple of external alerts initiated and this has surrounded lack of service to young people who need immediate support in relation to their emotional well-being. This area continues to be a challenge and has been addressed within the staff group to ensure any issues are automatically followed up and then recorded to demonstrate IROs role in challenging partner agencies involved in the care planning process.
- 7.4.** Equally when practice has been outstanding the IRO will send an email or speak with the social worker or partner agency in person to compliment them on their contribution in enhancing good outcomes for the child/young person. IROs do alert Social Care managers and senior managers when practice has been outstanding. Compliments are also made by IROs regarding foster carers and residential homes when the support they have provided a child or young person is felt to be exceptional.

8. Learning and development

- 8.1.** Regional seminars have been rolled out to IROs within the region for the past 3 years now. The service managers from each of the nine local authorities within the region enlist speakers to deliver on the different topics that have been identified by the IROs themselves and specific priorities of development. This continues to be a valuable opportunity in respect of IROs sharing their own experiences and offering suggestions with new developments. The ICS service manager chairs the regional IRO managers meeting which takes place four times a year and has recently joined the National IRO managers partnership group which meets at the DFE (Department for Education) office in London. The attendance of the ICS service manager at both these meetings enables information about national developments in respect of IROs and children in care to be shared seamlessly when contributing to the national and regional work plan.
- 8.2.** The regional seminars have continued to be held quarterly throughout 2016-17, and topics have included pathway planning, UASC (Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Child), Special Guardianship Orders and learning from a SCR (Serious Case Review) relating to this, Safeguarding Looked after children, CAFCASS, CAFCASS plus and placement with parents. There is good attendance by the IROs in Nottinghamshire who value these workshops, with the learning being shared with their own group whilst exploring how any elements can be integrated into their own practice.

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

- 9.1.** 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. With the number of young people progressing onto independent living some have been sad to end their relationship with the

IRO and have appreciated the support and guidance provided whilst in care. The service values the views of children and feedback was sought from those young people aged 9 years and over, parents/carers and professionals who attended a LAC review in January/February 2017. Questionnaires were given out following 115 LAC reviews regarding 142 children and the return rate was positive with 398 forms returned from professionals and parents with 31 returned and completed by children and young people. This is a larger sample from the previous year, which is a positive increase in participation.

Comments received from parents and professionals;

95% of parents, 99% of carers, and 98% of professionals felt welcomed by the IRO. The gap between parents, and carers/professionals' positive experience has narrowed (last time parents only rated this 87%, compared to professionals 99%, and this had been a target for improvement).

The IRO was receptive to ensuring that balance was given to F's short-term and long-term needs – SSW

*She was very fair and very polite. She was very nice – Father
Excellent communication and respect for chair – Mother*

Always leads a very person centred review. All parties have opportunities to participate and have a clear understand of professional's responsibilities – LAC Achievement

Is an experienced and excellent IRO who is respectful and listens to review participants. He is also clear and firm with good safeguarding skills – Children's Guardian

- The child-centred and holistic approach
- That difficult subjects were faced and discussed, and not skirted over
- Recognition of challenge to drift

Feedback from young people;

- 97% felt welcomed
- 95% understood what was discussed
- 92% felt involved
- 95% felt all the important things were talked about
- 89% understood what was decided

It's good to know I have all the support

I understood everything and I got all the answers I wanted to hear

Everyone said nice things and I am doing well. I was happy.

Of those who did not attend their review, it appears that children and young people are not unduly disadvantaged by not attending and have a very high satisfaction level of feeling their views were represented.

It appears that considerable effort is made by the social workers and the IROs to ensure there is no disadvantage, with young people being seen and clear explanations given.

- 9.2.** Exploring how the service can obtain the views of all children through other means than questionnaires is being explored. An IRO is involved in the project group with young people looking at the best means of obtaining views about their review and involvement with their IRO. This was discussed with the Nottinghamshire Children in Care Council - No Labels Group in respect of children 5-9 years and the feedback received was that the 'listen to me' booklets was the best means for these children to put forward their views.

10. Key findings

- The LAC population has remained stable throughout the year which has enabled IROs to continue to fulfil the wider expectations of their role; including contacting children/young people in advance of reviews and monitoring a child's case on an on-going basis.
- There have been examples of good outcomes being achieved for children and young people.
- Internal secondment opportunities have resulted in staff taking up permanent positions.
- Reviews indicate a good level of child participation and evidence of the voice of the child.
- Child friendly reports are now produced for children and young people if they want them.
- IROs are developing their lead roles in specific areas which is enhancing the profile of the service.
- There has been a significant reduction in the number of alerts being initiated by IROs to Social Care practitioners. There is evidence of enhanced communication between the IROs and the LAC team.
- Positive comments about the IRO group from recent questionnaire
- IROs continue to value the role specific regional training opportunities and are seeking to be involved in promoting the knowledge and skills of newly appointed social workers.

11. Areas for focus during 2017-18

- Continue to raise the profile of the IRO by involving them in developing new members of staff and to regularly attend events involving LAC.
- Continue to provide challenge and support to all agencies, including children's social care, through review and alert process and engagement in learning activities.

- Develop a standard form which acknowledges positive work undertaken by agencies, including children's social care, in achieving good outcomes for children and young people.
- Implement a new system that enables IROs to share data they collate at the end of each review about practice with Team Managers.
- Strengthen the process IROs use to raise concerns about partner agencies' involvement in the child and young person's LAC review.
- Continue to strengthen working relationships with CAFCASS and other IROs within the region in order to share good practice
- Further explore the development of technology in ascertaining children and young people's views as part of their LAC review.
- Work with the Children in Care Council to develop a young person friendly annual report.

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 8.05.17