

Nottingham City Council

Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Service

IRO Service

Children in Care

Annual Report

2020 – 2021



Safe, clean, ambitious
Nottingham
A city we're all proud of



Nottingham
City Council

This report sets out the contribution of the Independent Reviewing Officers to quality assuring and improving services for children whom Nottingham City Council are responsible for.

This Annual Report provides evidence relating to the services in Nottingham City as required by statutory guidance.

The core business of the team includes the chairing of Children in Care reviews and monitoring the activity of the Local Authority as outlined in the IRO Handbook 2010.

The IRO Annual Report will be presented to The Corporate Parenting Board and the Local Safeguarding Partnership Board (LCPB).

Purpose of Service and Legal Context.

The service sits within the Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Service of Nottingham City Council's Children's Integrated Services division. The Independent Reviewing 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 2015.

The Responsibility of the IRO (Children in Care).

- The responsibility of the IRO changed from the management of the review process to a wider overview of the case. This includes regular monitoring and follow-up between reviews.

The IRO

- Plays a key role in relation to the improvement of care planning for children in care.
- Ensures a process for challenging drift and delay.
- Ensures that the views of the children, parents and carers are given sufficient weight in Care planning.

Professional Profile of the Independent Reviewing Officer Service (IRO).

The IRO Service sits within the Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Service offering independence in care planning. There are two Service Managers with distinctive roles one responsible for Children in Care and the other Child Protection. Both sides of the service sit together to support the crossover between child protection work and the work with children in care to ensure that we manage crisis intervention alongside care planning.

Independent Reviewing Officers.

Every child who is '*looked after*' (Nottingham City use the term children in care) must have a care plan. This document details the long-term plan for the child's upbringing, and the arrangements made by Nottingham City Children's Integrated Services to meet the child's day-to-day needs as well as the long term care planning for the child or young person. All Local Authorities have a statutory duty to review the Care Plan regularly, within legislative timescales, as stipulated in the Care Planning and Case Review Regulations.

It is a legal requirement for every child who is in care to have an Independent Reviewing Officer appointed to them under Section 118 of the Adoption and Children Act 2002. The Independent Reviewing Officers Handbook (2010) outlines the statutory guidance for IRO's and Local Authorities on their functions in relation to case management and review for children in care. The handbook specifies that the IRO should provide continuity in the oversight of matters relating to a child being in care and that they should strive to establish a consistent relationship with the child. The statutory duties of the IRO include the following:

- Monitor the performance of the Local Authority and their function in relation to the child's case.
- Participate in any review of the child's case.
- Ensure that any ascertained wishes and feelings of the child are given due consideration by the appropriate authority.
- Perform any other function, which is prescribed by the regulations.

From December 2012, under the terms of the Legal Aid Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 the children in care definition was extended to include those children placed on remand in a secure unit or youth offending institution. This legislation placed a responsibility on all Local Authorities to treat the child who is remanded into custody as a child in care up to the age of 18 years. Each of these children is required to have a Remand Plan, which is equivalent to the Care Plan.

Independent Reviewing Officers role in Short Breaks.

The Statutory Guidance on how to safeguard and promote the welfare of disabled children using short breaks 2010 focuses in particular on the decision as to whether overnight short breaks should be provided under section 17 or section 20 of the Children Act 1989 and the arrangements in relation to 'looked after' status if section 20 provision is made.

The guidance states (para 3.19) that reviews for children who are receiving short breaks under S20 arrangements but who are not looked after should take place at least every six months. Reviews for children in care must take place in accordance with the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010 and be undertaken by an IRO.

Within Nottingham City Council Short Breaks Services Policy, IROs are responsible for chairing all reviews where children are accessing Short Breaks for 36 nights or above.

Management Team and Staffing.

The Head of Service is John Matravers and the service continues to have a permanent staff team. The Fostering IRO is now managed by the IRO service.

As a service we continue to have a culturally diverse team, which reflects the diverse population of Nottingham City.

During the Covid pandemic the IROs have adapted to new ways of working which have included remote working with virtual meetings as well as face to face activity. They have been able to successfully engage some young people through virtual means which is positive. Due to the challenges of the pandemic the IRO service developed new ways of working which meant that contact with children and families was maintained.

Supervision and Training.

IROs have monthly supervision and informal supervision when required. All IROs have a yearly performance appraisal and are encouraged to attend training in line with the requirements of Social Work England. The team has the opportunity to attend regional workshops for IROs which are held four times a year and includes our partners from the East Midlands region.

Team members access the training provided by the Nottingham City Council learning and development team as well as the LSPB training opportunities. Partner agencies also offer a variety of training courses, which can be accessed. In addition, we have quarterly team development days in which we have undertaken work around improvements to the IRO Service or undertaken focused training.

There is a protocol in place to provide a framework for communication and working practices between CAF/CASS and the IRO service. Whilst meetings with CAF/CASS have been hampered by capacity and lockdown during the year, direct liaison between the local CAF/CASS Service Manager and the IRO Service Manager continues to be developed with regular liaison between the services.

IRO Service structure chart:



Updates on priorities set in 2019-2020.

The improvement plan developed following the OFSTED visit in 2018 focussed on a re-design as to how children in care reviews are conducted. These needed to be more strengths based using the Signs of Safety model. This enables the use of a more child friendly approach. In 2020, we also engaged with colleagues from Essex County Council as our Partners in Practice and learned from their child-centred approach.

This identified the need to simplify the care plan by reducing the number of actions and recommendations following a review. The outcome of which is that the plan is smarter, easier to

understand and children and families can be clear about what needs to change or what needs to happen to achieve more positive outcomes for children.

1. Child Contribution paper to be revised and used at every review – this is due to be formally launched. The Service Manager for the IRO service is negotiating with IT colleagues to design a bespoke website where all information that children need to know about whilst in the care of the Local Authority, including their rights, how to access Mind of My Own (MOMO) etc. This will be designed to be more accessible and on a more friendly forum.
2. Process to be developed to address drift and delay in the care plan- In response a case review form has been developed whereby the IRO has to review the child’s file in between reviews to identify any issues about case progression. If there are any concerns identified then the IRO completes the form and forwards this to the team manager to address the concerns.

Children in Care Data 2020 - 21

The Children in Care outturn position at 2020 - 2021 was 687. Caseloads are slightly higher than recommended in the IRO handbook. The handbook recommends a caseload of 50-70 per IRO as being manageable. At present 8 full time IRO’s hold caseloads of around 72-75, with 3 of the posts being part time holding caseloads of around 25-30 cases.

In terms of outcomes during 2020-21, there were 24 Adoption Orders granted, 29 Special Guardianship Orders granted (SGO) and 8 Child Arrangement Orders made.

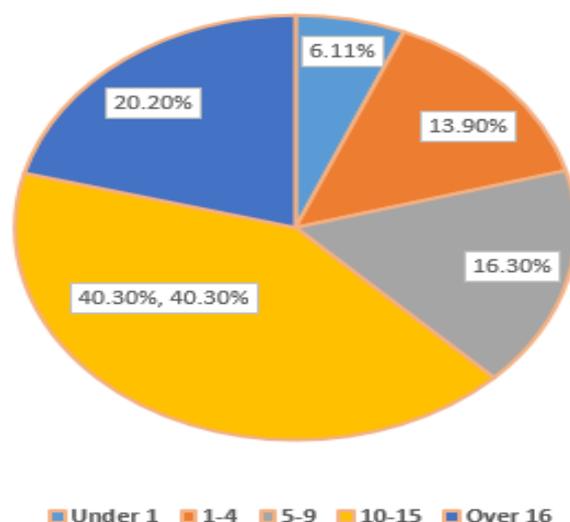
During the reporting period 64% of Young People/Children have remained in the same placement for at least 2 years or more. This has provided stability in both care and education.

The data for children in care in age groups, ethnicity and gender is detailed below:

Age	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Under 1	6.7%	5.3%	6.4%	6%	6.11%
1 - 4	9.7%	12.3%	10.2%	12%	13.9%%
5 - 9	18.5%	16.7%	14.9%	16%	16.3%
10 - 15	41.2%	41.6%	42.1%	42%	40.3%
Over 16	23.9%	24.1%	26.4%	24%	20.2%

There is no marked increased of note from last years figures.

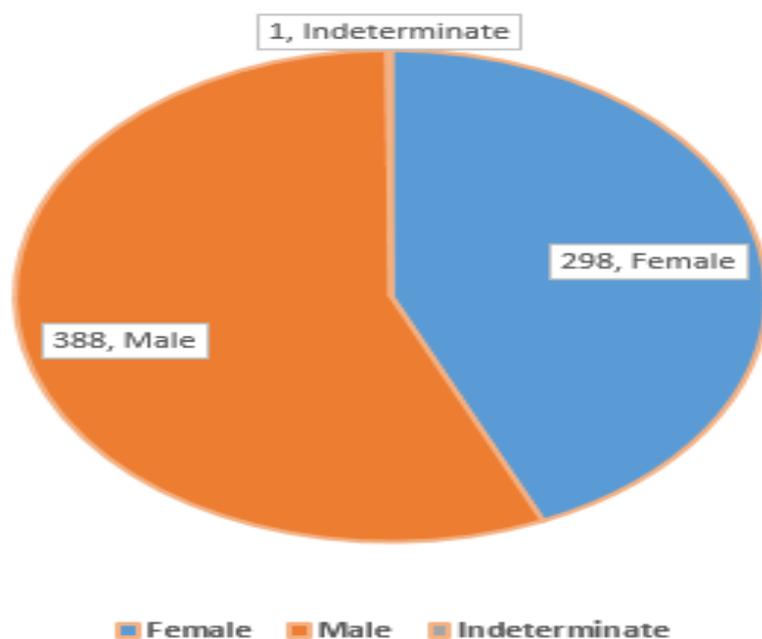
Ages of Children in Care



Ethnicity of Children in Care	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Arab	3	24	0	4	8
Asian / Asian British / Bangladeshi	1	1	3	3	4
Asian / Asian British / Pakistani	13	13	11	11	10
Asian / Asian British / Indian	3	3	3	0	1
Asian / Asian British / Any other Asian background	17	18	26	19	19
Black / Black British / African	29	23	35	31	24
Black / Black British / Caribbean	20	23	20	25	31
Black / Black British / Any other Black background	6	5	8	6	12
Gypsy / Roma	3	3	8	7	8
Mixed White & Black African	8	8	9	7	7
Mixed White & Asian	6	5	5	14	26*
Mixed White & Black Caribbean	71	78	68	88	89
Mixed any other mixed background	26	31	27	26	23
Other ethnic group	16	0	20	19	29
Unknown	5	1	2	3	1
White British	362	356	348	361	360
White Irish	7	7	4	3	4
White any other White background	24	19	32	35	38
Total	620	618	629	662	687

*There has been an increase of children from a dual heritage White/Asian in this reporting period. This reflects three additional families, 2 families of 4 siblings and 1 family with 3 children, with 4 of the children being placed with family.

Gender of Children in Care



Gender of Children in	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
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Care					
Male	331	328	359	373	388
Female	289	292	270	283	298
Indeterminate	0	0	0	0	1

There is no marked increased of note from last years figures. One Young Person is transitioning therefore this is described as Indeterminate for the report.

Advocacy.

The commissioning of advocacy services remains with the Children's Society. They have been to a team meeting to introduce their service. Additionally, the Children's Society leaflet is included in the Coming into care pack. IRO's this year have actively accessed this service on behalf of children or have encouraged them to access this service. Data will be available in the next reporting period.

Timeliness of Children in Care Reviews.

94.9% of Children in Care Reviews took place within the statutory timescales which is positive because it serves to ensure that a review of care planning is taking place at regular intervals.

Children and Young People's Involvement in Reviews.

92% of children in care participated in their review process through a number of fora either by attending the meeting, completing the contribution paper or for some having contact either by phone, email or a virtual visit with the IRO before their review is held. Childrens attendance at their review meeting has decreased by 2%. The 2% identified have been those young people who do not wish to participate online.

IROs continue to support and encourage children to chair their own meetings or set their own agenda where appropriate.

Contact with young people between reviews continues to improve as caseloads allow. Also, with the Covid restrictions, IROs have made use of virtual calls to gain the wishes and feelings of children for their reviews.

IROs continue to make a conscious effort to further increase the participation of children by undertaking child friendly reviews which are individualised to each child's needs and abilities. Furthermore, children are reassured in between reviews or before the review starts, giving them the confidence to participate fully in their own review. The IROs were assisted by our Partners in Practice, Essex, who helped to identify what worked and what didn't enabling the IRO Service to adapt accordingly.

Progress and Activity between Children in Care Reviews.

During this reporting period, the IROs have been able to monitor the progress of their allocated children thus fulfilling their duties as outlined in the IRO Handbook (2010). This has resulted in care plans being effectively monitored and any drift or delay escalated to the relevant social work team. This has also improved communication with the Social Work teams.

All children at their initial Child in Care review are given the contact details of their allocated IRO and every effort is made to ensure the same IRO chairs any subsequent Child in Care reviews, offering a level of consistency moving forward. The stability within the team has enabled strong relationships to be developed between the child or young person and their IRO. Furthermore, there is evidence of the IRO regularly reviewing the quality of practice in the child's file, thereby strengthening the IRO footprint/management oversight.

Audits.

IROs contribute to the learning and improvement framework which includes the auditing of randomly selected cases. Analysis is drawn from this information and action identified where appropriate. During this reporting year 22 cases have been presented at the audit moderation panel - all children were deemed safe with 64% (Reviews) and 50% (Plans) deemed to be good or better. The IROs have been given individual feedback from these audits. The feedback is also discussed in team meetings to enable information sharing and improvements to be made.

Management Oversight.

Statutory Guidance states that operational Social Work Managers must consider the decisions from the Review before they are finalised. This is due in part to the need to ensure any resource implications have been addressed. Once the decisions are completed, the Manager has 5 days to raise any queries or objections.

IROs have continued to monitor the quality of care plans, adoption plans, pathway plans and Social Worker reports. Where any issues are identified, the IROs raised these informally with the appropriate team manager, however, if these concerns are not acted upon then a formal escalation process commences.

Dispute Resolution Data 2020- 21

Dispute Resolution Policy

Overall, during the course of the past year, the majority of formal escalations have been responded to and resolved.

Where matters remain unresolved, the IROs follows the dispute resolution policy which involves notifying Senior Managers within social work teams. This ensures that the appropriate actions are taken to ensure that the young people are safeguarded appropriately in line with their care plan and the recommendations made at reviews.

The dispute resolution pathway needs to be developed within Liquid Logic. This will enable more accurate reporting in terms of the number of disputes and the outcomes. Currently there remain challenges in embedding this process into the system but we hope to resolve these over the coming year.

Looking back over the last reporting year the service has raised 72 formal concerns. None of these have gone beyond the level of a Head of Service, (with only one dispute being escalated to a Head of Service). No cases have necessitated a referral to CAFCASS to be resolved. From the data currently analysed the main contributing factors to the disputes are:

- Issues around placement suitability.
- Numerous changes of Social Workers
- Health needs not recorded as met on the child's file.
- Issues with statutory visits not being in timescale.
- Drift and delay in progressing the care plan.
- Reports not written and shared with parents, carers and child 3 days before the review is held.

Compliments from the IRO Service.

The dispute policy in place also includes the formal recognition of good practice. This involves the IRO completing a compliments form which is then sent to the relevant Senior Managers. During this reporting year 21 compliments have been sent to Senior Managers about the Social Worker's good practice and the IRO's wishing to have this formally recognised.

Annual Work Programme and Key Themes for April 2021- March 2022.

1. To work with the Fostering Manager to develop a foster carers and Supervising Social Workers review report.
2. To ensure the dispute resolution process is embedded in Liquid Logic so that the IRO voice is visible in the child's file around escalations.
3. To continue to implement and review the IRO Service Improvement Plan.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alison Platkiw'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Alison Platkiw
Service Manager (IRO Service)