

<b>Meeting Title</b>	Children and Young People’s Scrutiny Committee
<b>Report Title</b>	Children’s Services Improvement
<b>Meeting Date</b>	15 <sup>th</sup> May 2024

<b>Corporate Director(s)/Director(s):</b>	Catherine Underwood, Corporate Director for People Ailsa Barr, Director for Children’s Integrated Services
<b>Portfolio Holder(s):</b>	Councillor Cheryl Barnard
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**Summary of issues:**

In July 2022 Nottingham City Children’s Services received its full Inspection of Local Authority Children’s Services (ILACS), which led to an inadequate judgement. As a result, Children’s Services have now entered a monitoring visit regime.

On 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> April 2023, a fourth monitoring visit with a focus on Children in Care (planning and achieving permanence) took place. This report provides some context to the monitoring visit regime and presents the findings of the narrative letter published by Ofsted of its fourth monitoring visit of Nottingham’s Children’s Services.

<b>Recommendation(s):</b>
1. Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee consider the findings of the Ofsted’s 4th Monitoring Visits of Children’s Services.
2. Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee note the progress made and further areas for focus since the full inspection and the next steps
3. Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee confirm its commitment to improving Children’s Services and its ambition for Nottingham Children’s Services to be delivering consistently good social care services to children and young people

## 1. Background

1.1 Committee will be aware that Nottingham City Children’s Services received an Ofsted ILACS inspection in July 2022 with the report being published in September 2022 (appendix 1). The outcome of the inspection was:

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Requires improvement to be good

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Inadequate
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Requires improvement to be good
Overall effectiveness	Inadequate (limited by the grading within the domain of children in need of help and protection).

1.2 The inspection identified 8 specific areas for improvement:

- Effectiveness and timeliness of responses to children’s needs when first presented to the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH).
- Management oversight and direction of front-line work and the local authority designated officer (LADO).
- Social work capacity so that social workers and first-line managers can respond effectively to children in need of help and protection, and that children in care have greater consistency of social worker.
- Placement sufficiency for children in care and those with complex needs.
- The service response to care leavers aged 21 and over.
- The service response to young people who are aged 16/17 years who present as homeless.
- The quality and timeliness of return home interviews.
- Oversight of children missing from education and those who are electively home educated.

1.3 On 12<sup>th</sup> December 2022, the local authority submitted an action plan to Ofsted which addressed the inspection findings. Ofsted formally responded on 19<sup>th</sup> December 2022 confirming that the action plan accurately reflected the findings of the inspection. The Ofsted Action plan is monitored through the Children’s Improvement Board, which is chaired by an independent Department for Education Improvement Advisor. The Children’s Improvement Board has been restructured to form a monthly Executive Improvement Board and quarterly Partnership Improvement Board.

1.4 The monthly Executive Improvement Board focusses largely on improving the performance of the Council’s Children’s Services following the Ofsted inspection. It supports the work of the Board in delivering children’s services in Nottingham that result in consistently good outcomes for children, young people and their families. The Executive Improvement Board membership includes the Portfolio Holder for Children, Young People and Education as the statutory Lead Member, the Chief Executive as well as senior leaders, ensuring robust monthly senior leadership oversight of progress improvements. The quarterly partnership board has oversight of the progress being made by internal services as well as in the broader children’s partnership. The Partnership Board is made up of senior partnership leaders in addition to the Executive Improvement Board members.

1.5 In addition to the monthly monitoring of the Ofsted improvement plan through the Improvement Board, the division has an internal process to ensure robust delivery and accountability. Programme management support and resources are being provided to each Head of Service to support delivery of the plan and ensure deadlines are met and evidence of impact is being gathered. Internal monitoring of progress of the Ofsted action plan and wider transformation plan is delivered through a monthly

portfolio board, which is chaired by the Service Director for Children's Integrated Services. This reports to the Corporate Director through a monthly Oversight and Assurance Meeting which she chairs.

1.6 As a result of the inadequate judgement the Local Authority has entered into a period of Monitoring Visits. These are 2 day on site visits focused upon a specific area of practice. Judgements are not provided, but a narrative letter of findings is produced. The first letter is not published, but all subsequent letters are published on the Ofsted Website. To date the service has received 4 Monitoring Visits:

- The Front Door (MASH, Duty and EDT) – February 2023.
- Children in Need and Children with a Child Protection Plan – July 2023
- Care Leavers aged 18+ - November 2023
- Children in Care – April 2024

1.7 A full report detailing the progress the service is making in its improvement and transformation journey was presented to Scrutiny Committee in January 2024. The information below will detail the key themes from the previous 3 monitoring visits before detailing the findings of the current visit.

## **2. Themes from previous monitoring visits**

2.1 There have been some common themes of progress made across the previous three visits:

- Evidence of tangible improvements being made.
- Investment in posts to increase front line and management capacity, which has helped manage workload and demand, increase management oversight, reduce caseloads and improve staff morale.
- The workforce feels supported by managers and can feel the positive impact that reduced caseloads are having, this is resulting in better practice being more consistently delivered.
- Staff develop strong and meaningful relationships with their children and young people, know them well and act as good parents. This enables them to assess children and young people's needs to offer good support, particularly to our more vulnerable children and care leavers (such as disabled children, care leavers with additional needs and 16- and 17-year olds who present as homeless). Processes (such as child in need review meetings, visits etc) often take place sooner than the statutory minimum to meet the needs of the child, young person or family, meaning that children and young people are seen or have their circumstances reviewed in timescales appropriate to them.
- There is a committed senior leadership team who have clear oversight and knowledge of performance within service areas, and recently developed dashboards are enabling managers and front line staff understand performance and prioritise tasks that need to be completed, leading to timelier responses for children and families.
- The quality assurance framework has been strengthened and is being embedded. This is correctly identifying areas for improvement and development to help further strengthen practice and learning.

2.2 Inspectors noted that there were further common areas for development, which aligned with the service's self-evaluation of practice:

- Inconsistency in quality of assessments or plans.
- Inconsistency in the frequency and quality of supervision to help progress outcomes for children in a timely way.
- Some children and young people experience too many changes of social worker – due to difficulties around recruitment and retention of staff – an issue being experienced not only in Nottingham but nationally.
- Further work with partners needed to reduce delays in assessment and intervention which some children and families continue to experience.

### 3. Findings from the 4<sup>th</sup> Monitoring Visit

- 3.1 As with all Monitoring Visits no grading is given but findings are presented in a narrative report.
- 3.2 Inspectors noted that despite significant financial challenges and pressures, senior leaders had secured additional funding and management and staffing posts and have continued to build upon improvements made since the last inspection. They noted that there are signs of a stabilising workforce and numbers of children entering care is reducing due to the strengthened support provided to families in their family networks. Many children in care live within 20 miles of their family.
- 3.3 Inspectors observed that practice across the service is variable. Families receive a more consistent and better planned service from the Fieldwork service but when a child transfers to the Children in Care service the response is more crisis driven and less consistent. This is due to the staffing investment in the service being very recent and so is yet to have an impact. Changes of social workers and higher workloads in this part of the service mean that social workers are visiting in accordance with statutory minimums but that this is not always according to the individualised needs of children. In addition, there are times where this limits Social Workers' ability to complete quality direct work with children, a fact that was recognised by the children that Inspectors met. Inspectors noted that the improvements and developments in other service areas inspires confidence that this will also be achieved in the Children in Care workforce. They noted that there have been improvements in the quality and frequency of supervision and staff feel supported and able to approach managers and leaders.
- 3.4 As a result practice across the service is currently variable. Within the Fieldwork service inspectors noted creative planning and support to manage risk, with decisions being child centred and informed by a thorough assessment. However, assessments within the Children in Care service are not yet routinely updated upon a change in a child's situation and specialist assessments are sometimes needed to inform risk management and planning. This means that life decisions are being made for some of our longer-term Children in Care without thorough and detailed assessment. Further work is needed to ensure that care plans reflect the longer-term plans to achieving stability for children. This would be better supported by Independent Reviewing Officer's decisions at care plan reviews being sequenced and prioritising the actions to be taken as well as increased management oversight of plans.
- 3.5 Inspectors noted that at times a lack of suitable foster homes has led to children remaining in an unsuitable family environment for longer than planned or moving into residential care. This is a national issue, and inspectors noted that leaders are working with partners and other local authorities to find creative solutions. The lack of available

homes has meant some children have been placed in unregistered homes, and although there are processes to ensure children are seen within agreed timescales, these are too new to evidence impact. Inspectors also noted that although children were positive about their education and are encouraged to take part in their personal education planning meetings, placement sufficiency impacts upon the ability to prioritise a child's educational placement.

- 3.6 Inspectors saw that senior leaders have been working with health providers to ensure that children entering care receive a timely initial health assessment but note that further work is needed to ensure this is consistent.

#### **4. Next steps**

- 4.1 As noted within the Monitoring Visit letter, additional resourcing and funding has been approved for the Children in Care service. Recruitment to permanent posts will take place. This will mean that the service will move from 3 teams to 4 Children in Care teams. This will mean additional staffing and manager capacity, and therefore more detailed oversight will be in place to progress children's care plans. It is anticipated that the additional staffing and management support and oversight will reduce caseloads and support stabilisation of the service which will have a positive effect on the quality of practice and therefore will directly benefit Children in Care.
- 4.2 Work remains ongoing with Human Resources to support robust recruitment and retention activity to make Nottingham City the Authority of choice for Social Workers to create stability in the workforce.
- 4.3 The findings will be incorporated into the service improvement plans with clear actions and timelines for completion set.
- 4.4 Work will continue with health partners to ensure that children receive timely Initial and Review health assessments to ensure that their needs are being fully met.
- 4.5 The Children's Improvement Board will continue to meet monthly and will review progress made across the service, including specific focus in relation to Children in Care services.
- 4.6 Two further monitoring visits are anticipated to take place by the end of the year which we can expect to revisit to the Front Door (to follow up on further progress since the monitoring visit in February 2023) and a revisit to the Children in Care Service. It is anticipated that the next full Inspection of Local Authority Children's Service (ILACS) will take place at some point during 2025.