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Dear Catherine

Monitoring visit to Nottingham City children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Nottingham City children's services on 3 and 4 April 2024. This was the fourth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in July 2022. His Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Margaret Burke and Jenny-Ellen Scotland.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in support to children in care planning and achieving permanence since the last inspection. Inspectors focused on:

- The quality of children's assessments, plans and reviews.
- The quality of visits and work with children.
- Where children in care live and the support they and their carers receive.
- The quality of management oversight and supervision.
- Stability and sustainability of the children in care service workforce, including the impact of current caseloads on practice.
- Performance and quality assurance oversight of senior leaders.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

Headline findings

Senior leaders have continued to build on improvements made in their delivery of services to children and families in Nottingham City since the last inspection. Working within the context of significant financial challenges and wider pressures on the council, senior leaders have successfully secured funding for a more balanced base budget for children's services. They have also secured very much needed permanent

additional management and staffing posts in the children in care service to support the oversight of plans and reduce caseloads. There are signs of a stabilising workforce and a reduction in staff turnover in some parts of children's services. The number of children entering care is slowly reducing as support now strongly focuses on supporting children within their family networks. The vast majority of children in care live within 20 miles of the city. Where it has been identified that further support and intervention are required following an assessment, there is evidence of an improved service response for children and their families from the fieldwork services. Once a decision has been made that a child in care will not be returning home, their social work support transfers to the children in care service. Support to children in this part of the service has not seen the improvements evident in other service areas. In this part of the service, many children experience too many changes of social workers and do not get the support they and their carers need at the time they most need it.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Most children who come into care are well supported by the fieldwork service. Careful consideration is given to the child's needs and how best these can be met. Creative planning and support options are considered to manage risk and keep children safe. Decisions are child-centred and for most children informed by a detailed assessment which demonstrates an understanding of the family. There is clear consistent management oversight and legal options are appropriately considered for interventions with a clear rationale for those decisions taken.

The lack of available foster carers and suitable homes for children in the care of Nottingham City Council impacts on the authority's ability to safeguard a small number of children effectively. Some of these children, following a decision made for them to come into care, have remained with parents who have been considered as unable to meet their needs appropriately for longer than planned. The lack of suitable placement options has resulted in higher numbers of younger children being placed in residential children's homes. Leaders are responding creatively to placement sufficiency challenges, working collaboratively with other authorities and partners on both local and national initiatives.

A small number of younger children are placed in unregistered children's homes. There are also a number of older children living in unregistered supported accommodation. New systems have recently been introduced by senior managers to improve oversight of these placements. They include head of service and service manager's scrutiny, supporting providers to seek registration, and additional oversight from the placements contract monitoring service. However, many of these processes are too new to ensure that children in these settings are routinely seen within identified timescales, or to be confident that the homes they are placed in are able to provide safe care.

Children who remain in care long term are supported by the children in care service. Most children in care live in stable homes and have their needs met by their carers. However, for those children whose needs or situation changes, the social work response in this part of the service is often crisis-driven and reactive. Social workers in the children in care service do not routinely update children's assessments, even when children's needs and situations significantly change. Children who have presented with behaviours which adults have found challenging to manage do not routinely benefit from specialist assessment to help understand and inform how best to manage risks and respond to their needs. Stability and disruption meetings are not routinely held, to assist with planning or learning for the child, carers, practitioners or the organisation.

Care plans are often limited to considering the immediate situation and do not fully address longer-term issues or permanence stability for children. Review decisions are often about the here and now. Independent reviewing officers' decisions at best are detailed but they often do not set prioritised timescales for the actions listed. Most targets are set to be completed by the next review, which is often scheduled for several months later. This makes it more challenging for the child and carers or when social workers change to know what the long-term plans and the actions that need to be prioritised are.

With these weaknesses in the service, important life decisions are made about children without being informed by an up-to-date assessment or clear long-term plan. New processes evidence some senior management oversight and steer within the children in care services, but this oversight is not currently effective enough to ensure compliance with procedures and follow up on plans to provide confidence that children are well supported to be successful within their care homes.

Most children with social workers in the children in care service are visited every six weeks irrespective of the child's identified needs. Some of these visits are conducted by duty social workers, who children may not know. Social workers recognised that some children would benefit from being visited more frequently but told inspectors that the demands of their caseloads prevent them from doing this. This makes it more difficult for children to build trusting relationships with their social workers. The children who met with inspectors told us that social workers' caseloads are too high, meaning visits are quick pop-ins where there is no time to get to the bottom of any issues that are arising.

Participation and direct work with children in care is a mixed picture. Social workers in the fieldwork teams demonstrate that they are carrying out this work more effectively and they routinely seek children's views to inform their assessments, court processes and care planning. Social workers in the children in care teams do not consistently undertake purposeful direct work.

Children who leave care are supported when relevant to achieve permanence via formal orders such as adoption and special guardianship orders (SGOs). Support

continues as long as required, with options on an individual case-by-case basis for ongoing support from permanence officers. For children leaving care as part of court processes, senior managers in the fieldwork service maintain oversight to ensure that progress is maintained for children. Leaders have recognised the need to strengthen and formalise the support offer to all SGO carers and plans are currently being developed.

For those children who are returning to live with their parents after a period in care and subject to a care order, there is more variability. Pragmatic support plans are made to support children and their parents. For some children there has been drift and delay in revoking orders, meaning children have unnecessarily been subject to statutory intervention for longer than needed. For those children placed with parents more recently, there is evidence of clearer management oversight and grip. The updated placement with parents policy is now being more consistently applied and legal meetings are held to consider revocation of orders in a more timely manner.

Children are positive about their education experiences and the support they are given by their school. The support of the virtual school is evident, and children are encouraged to take part in their personal education planning meeting, resulting for some children in creative planning. Children's education needs are not always prioritised when securing placements for children, often as a consequence of the challenges of placement sufficiency. This has resulted for a small number of children, particularly those placed out of area, waiting for some time for appropriate full-time education after moving into their new home.

Health performance for children in care has fluctuated over the last year. While most children will eventually have a health assessment, the vast majority of children coming into care do not receive an initial health assessment in the required timescales to ensure that their health needs are fully understood so they can be addressed. Senior leaders continue to have discussions with health providers and seek longer-term solutions for this to be resolved.

Senior leaders have continued to invest in and strengthen quality assurance processes. Findings from individual audits are routinely translating into whole-service learning. Leaders have gained more insight into the quality of their services and now have an accurate overview of their strengths and areas for practice development. This is helping the local authority to better plan, develop and improve the support offered to children supported by the children in care service area. Children told inspectors that they had experienced several changes of social workers. The number of permanent social work staff in the children in care team is gradually increasing, but from a very low base. Over 50% of these posts are currently covered by agency staff. However, this includes temporary cover for the newly established additional posts created within the children in care services while these posts are recruited permanently. Caseloads are variable across the service, with considerable differences between the workload of social workers within the children in care teams and those

in fieldwork teams. While caseloads in the fieldwork teams are now at a manageable level, some social workers in children in care teams still have caseloads that are too high. Senior leaders are aware of these challenges and believe the new funding for additional posts in the children in care service will alleviate some of these pressures.

The work undertaken by senior leaders within children's services to secure service improvements and developments in other service areas has inspired confidence in the children in care workforce. Social workers are optimistic about working for Nottingham City Council and believe that things are getting better and will continue to improve. Staff spoke positively about the changes in the culture of the service, service developments and having access to training. All felt well supported by their line managers; they had easy access to service managers and the head of service, who were described as visible and approachable. Improvements are noticeable in the quality of supervision. Supervision now increasingly takes place monthly. Supervision notes reflect a discussion and checks on compliance. There is still room for further improvement to ensure that these conversations and notes reflect longer-term plans and aspirations for children.

There is a recognition by leaders that despite whole-service developments across children's services, the children in care service remains the weakest service area. Leaders acknowledge that there is much more to do to reach and sustain key service improvements for children in care. They have delivered improvements in other parts of the service and are confident that they now have many of the building blocks in place to do so for children in their care.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Margaret Burke
His Majesty's Inspector