



Report to Audit Committee Children’s Integrated Services Ofsted Focussed Visit and Improvement Programme

26 June 2020

The Wider Context

Nottingham’s vision, as set out in our Children and Young People’s Plan, is for ‘A city where every child and young person can enjoy their childhood in a warm and supporting environment, free from poverty and safe from harm; a city where every child grows up to achieve their full potential’.

The experience and outcomes of the most vulnerable children in our city are of paramount importance. The Focused Visit specifically looked at the arrangements put in place by Nottingham City Council. We know that achieving outcomes for children who need help and protection takes place in partnership and we will also be working with partners both within the council and in partner organisations to secure the improvements needed.

The requirement for these improvements is set in the context of the high and increasing levels of deprivation and need experienced by our families in Nottingham and the impact of national government budget cuts to the local authority.

Action Undertaken

In response to the two priority actions, and wider recommendations made around practice improvement, an action plan was developed and provided to Ofsted in March. The improvement programme is led by the Director of Children’s Services and the Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People.

The key headline actions are:

Priority Area for Action 1 – Social Work Practice	
<i>Address the systemic failures in social work practice to ensure that planning and intervention for children improve their experiences, and that new and emerging risk are identified and responded to.</i>	
1.	Ensure that there is sufficient capacity for strong leadership of immediate and ongoing practice improvement.
2.	Ensure that Nottingham City Council has an operating model which enables good practice and workforce capacity
3.	Ensure that all staff and managers are clear about Nottingham’s social work practice models and ‘what good looks like’
4.	Ensure that assessments and plans are of good quality and accurately evaluate risk and address the needs of children
5.	Assertive practice ensures that children’s needs are understood and appropriate action/intervention is put in place to improve outcomes for children, including those experiencing neglect.

6.	Ensure that all managers are clear about the expectations of their oversight on casework, to ensure children's needs are understood and effectively addressed
7.	Develop an effective audit framework which provides an accurate appraisal of the experience of children and drives systematic improvements in practice.
8.	Ensure that senior managers and leaders have an accurate understanding of the experience of children
9.	Ensure effective Independent Reviewing Officer service which ensures effective plans and progress for children in care and children in need of protection
Priority Area for Action 2 – Workforce Capacity	
<i>Stabilise the workforce and address the significant shortfall in capacity to enable social worker sand fine line managers to respond effectively to children in need of help and protection.</i>	
10	Stabilise the social work workforce increase capacity in the short-term.
11	Develop a sustainable plan to ensure the sufficiency of social workers in the long-term.

To drive delivery of this action plan and to secure sustainable improvement which will make a real difference for children, young people and families, the Children at the Heart Improvement Board has been established. The Improvement Board is chaired by the Chief Executive and membership includes both the Leader of the Council and the Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People, along with senior officers of the Council. Key health, education and police partners are members. At the time of writing this report, the Board has met twice.

An Improvement Fund of £1.5m one-off funding has been identified to support short-term work force capacity and delivery of the improvement plan.

We have recruited a temporary Practice Improvement Director to provide additional senior leadership capacity to drive improvement, working with the Children's Services leadership team.

To support our improvement, the Department for Education have enabled to us access support from the Partners in Practice (PiP) innovation programme, which provides peer support from a partner local authority to support improvement. Our Partner in Practice is Essex County Council. The scope of the programme was co-produced between Nottingham City Council and PiP colleagues. In spite of an initial delay and the continuing covid-19 restrictions, the PiP team has been able to start work with us during May to understand practice issues, undertaking sampling of case files as well as discussions with senior managers, Team Managers and a range of practitioners, including those with specific case involvement. A series of feedback workshops are taking place with front line teams and the senior leadership team and this work will help to shape the plan for further work which they will undertake with us.

A prioritised practice development programme has been scoped to address the issues identified in the Focused Visit. Training workshops are in train, using virtual training events to support strong and focused learning founded on a clear practice model and directly relating to current practice examples.

We are reviewing other elements of our Learning Improvement Framework, particularly to strengthen our audit process, to ensure that audits reflect a consistent and accurate appraisal of the quality of practice and that effective learning is secured both by individual practitioners and by the wider service in response to audit findings.

Both the full inspection in 2018 and the Focused Visit in 2020 told us that workforce capacity was not sufficient to the demands and complexity of meeting children's needs in a city like Nottingham. An urgent priority has been to address the practitioner and front line manager workforce. Staffing gaps were swiftly filled, initially with agency staff, but it is vital to further stabilise staffing and to continue to strengthen recruitment with the support of our human resources team. We have revised our pay and progression model for social workers and have refreshed our rolling recruitment with a campaign launch due in coming weeks.

The improvement plan includes a review of the operating structure for sustainable services which will need to be considered within the council's financial priorities.

We are actively engaged in the Association of Directors of Children's Services Regional Improvement and Innovation Alliance, Local Government Association and the Department for Education to support improvement. We are also maintaining ongoing dialogue with Ofsted around our progress and our response to covid-19.

Next Steps

Planned improvement activity has been impacted by covid-19, but plans have been reprioritised where necessary and we are seeking to close delays wherever possible. We have had to be creative to deliver some of the planned activities, such as training workshops, but we have sustained positive engagement and created powerful learning opportunities. The improvement is closely monitored by the Children at the Heart improvement board to ensure delivery of the improvement plan but most importantly the impact on the outcomes and the experience of children.

Catherine Underwood
Corporate Director for People