



# Report to Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee Children's Integrated Services Ofsted Focussed Visit and Improvement Programme

## Background

Ofsted, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills inspect and regulate services that care for children and young people, including local authority children's services. In November 2018, Ofsted undertook an inspection of Nottingham City Council's children's services where Inspectors found that the service 'Requires Improvement to be Good'. NCC acted on the findings and in response developed an Improvement Action Plan which was led by the Director and Heads of Service.

In February 2020, Ofsted undertook a Focussed Visit to look specifically at the City Council's arrangements for children in need and those subject to a child protection plan, with a focus on children at risk of neglect.

There is no inspection rating given during a Focussed Visit, but overall inspectors concluded that the experience of children in need of help and protection has deteriorated since the last inspection.

Given the issues they found in the service areas they looked at, Ofsted issued two Priority Actions:

1. Address the systemic failures in social work practice to ensure that planning and intervention for children improve their experiences, and that new and emerging risks are identified and responded to.
2. Stabilise the workforce and address the significant shortfall in capacity to enable social workers and first line managers to respond effectively to children in need of help and protection.

In response to the findings of the Focussed Visit, an action plan was developed and shared with Ofsted in March this year. This report sets out progress to date on the key actions taken to address the identified Priority Actions and to improve our services for children and families. Given the nature of the Priority Actions, we have seen the scope of improvement across the wider services rather than confined only to the areas considered in the Focused Visit.

## 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, however, we know that achieving outcomes for children who need help and protection takes place in partnership and we are also 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.

The improvement of our children’s services is a priority for the council and it is important that corporate support has been committed, not just the resources of the children’s services. For example, the expertise and capacity of the human resources team, communications expertise and support of our ICT services are required for success.

### 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:

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| <b>Priority Area for Action 1 – Social Work Practice</b>  |   |
| <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                                   |
| <b>Priority Area for Action 2 – Workforce Capacity</b>  |   |
| <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</i>                       |   |

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| <i>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. The Board has now met four times.

An Improvement Fund of £1.5m one-off funding has been identified by the Council 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. A proposal has been developed to establish and to recruit a full time permanent Principal Social Worker role at a sufficiently senior level to embed and to sustain a strong focus on practice.

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 due to covid-19 and the continuing restrictions, the PiP team began 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. Feedback has also been presented to our Children at the Heart Improvement Board and the improvement plan will be updated to reflect priorities identified from working our with PiP partners.

Phase 2 of the PiP innovation programme will include a focus on Public Law Outline and Permanency Strategy a review of the Independent Reviewing Officer service and a virtual visit to Essex.

A prioritised practice development programme has been put in place 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 strengths-based practice model and directly relating to current practice examples with specific inclusion of neglect.

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 improved our pay and progression model for social workers and have refreshed our rolling recruitment with adverts being sent out each month. We will also be developing a rolling recruitment microsite.

We are actively engaged with 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.

## **Risk**

The Ofsted inspection activity tells us that in spite of the commitment of our practitioners and managers, some children in neglect are experiencing drift and delay. The children's service management team have ensured reviews have been undertaken to identify actions which have been required to address this.

Covid-19 has had a major impact on the lives of our children and families and on the activity of our children's services. A risk assessment process has ensured that we have considered each child's needs under covid-19. We have been working closely with partners, especially schools, to ensure we understand children's experiences under covid-19 and that we provide appropriate help and protection. Referrals to children's services have decreased during lockdown and although they are now increasing, it is anticipated that some children will have experienced hidden harm.

Following February's Focused Visit, Ofsted informed us that they would undertake a further Focused Visit in the autumn and that this would result in either assurance of sufficient improvement or a full inspection. Since covid-19 and the lockdown, Ofsted have been considering their inspection programme and are indicating that they are likely to be adjusting their activity. We anticipate a fuller review of children's experiences under covid-19, which would look at a wider range of our children's services than those areas considered under the Focused Visit. Our approach to improvement has taken in wider services, although this requires cultural and system improvement which will take time to fully address and to embed.

The implications of an inadequate inspection are most importantly that we would be failing to serve Nottingham's children well. However, it would also bring major external scrutiny with ministerial oversight and potential intervention. In addition, very substantial additional cost would be incurred. Achieving fast and demonstrable improvement will require significant additional resource. We need our practitioners and managers to be able to devote their attention whole-heartedly to the practice and improvement in a very short space of time.

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. This is of course a challenge in a very difficult financial context, but Ofsted is clear that the statutory requirements within which children's services will not be adjusted to take account of circumstances. 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.

In relation to covid-19, DfE guidance has been clear that it remains the responsibility of local authorities to meet their key statutory responsibilities for the welfare of children and families and for safeguarding children although a small number of limited adjustments have been provided for.

It is vital that we have robust and good quality services for our children and families. They are a key statutory duty, but also good services improve the experiences and the life chances of our most vulnerable children as they progress into adulthood and that makes a long term difference for them and for our city.

### **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.

### **Recommendations**

- Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee note the outcome of the Focussed Visit.
- Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee note and support the actions being undertaken to address the two Priority Actions and wider improvement, including the establishment of a Children's Services Improvement Board and commitment to an improvement fund.

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