



## Appendix A

# Report to Executive Board Children's Integrated Services Ofsted Focussed Visit and Improvement Programme

September 2020

### The Wider Context

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 - Immediate

In response to the two priority actions (and wider recommendations made around the practice improvements) we have developed an action plan which was submitted to Ofsted in March. The improvement programme has been led by the Director of Children's Services and the Portfolio Holder for Children's Services.

The key headline actions are:

<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 IRO 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 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.

An Improvement Fund of £1.4m one-off funding has been identified to support short-term work force capacity and the improvement plan.

### Action Undertaken – Follow up

Nottingham has been clear in its determination and commitment to provide good services for children and families and has acted on Ofsted’s findings with purpose and pace. This has been crucial to create the assurance of us taking appropriate action, but also to drive the changes which we need to make.

Appendix B sets out the key actions which have been completed against the improvement plan.

Highlights in summary:

1. The Children at the Heart Improvement Board is now well-established and provides monthly oversight of the improvement actions. Police, health and education partners are represented on the board. This provides a forum for support and challenge, including the engagement of partners’ commitment to support improvement.
2. A major training programme has been rolled out via Microsoft Teams during June and July, designed to ensure that all practitioners are clear about the Nottingham practice model. Further training is being provided to address specific practice elements, including holding risk. Essex Partners in Practice colleagues have led an online practice conference attended by over 100 of our practitioners. Training has been focused on application into practice and has been very well received.
3. New mechanisms have been put in place for engaging front-line practitioners and managers in the improvement of practice, including a Practice Leadership MS Teams group and a Practitioners Forum. These groups are making a strong contribution, including developing materials to support best practice. We are seeing practitioners stepping up as champions of good practice and embracing the challenge to improve practice.
4. Detailed diagnostic work (including case note reviews, observation, interviews) has been undertaken with our Partners in Practice from Essex County Council in order to give us an external view on our improvement requirements. This has reinforced the need for comprehensive practice improvement and for wider cultural change to underpin good practice and good quality services. There is a series of actions against these themes which we are building into our improvement action plan.
5. Alongside practice improvement, workforce capacity is vital. We have been able to engage agency staff to close staffing gaps, but clearly what we are seeking is stability

in our own workforce. It is vital because a) children need consistency in their workers and b) we need consistency in practice which can only be secured by developing and retaining our staff. The consequences of that lack of stable workforce were visible in the Focused Visit. Training did not keep up with the turnover of new staff, so our workforce was no longer working consistently to a clear Nottingham model. In addition, the lack of workforce capacity meant that caseloads have been excessive and that colleagues were pushed into monitoring and ticking the boxes, rather than doing productive, relationship-based work with children and families. We are now seeing the benefit of having staffing gaps filled with agency staffing: caseloads are reducing to a more manageable level allowing improvements in timescales and in the quality of practice and recording. To have a stable workforce we have to make this sustainable.

6. A new social work pay and progression structure is in place and work is now focusing on improving recruitment as part of the wider workforce strategy.
7. 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. The reflective case file audit programme restarted in June 2020, with moderation panels to ensure consistency in relation to what good looks like.

We continue to actively engage 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.

We are also working closely with our partners through our Improvement Board, Safeguarding Partnership, Small Steps Big Changes Board and the Integrated Care Partnership.

### **The Impact of Covid-19**

As a result of the Covid-19 crisis, Children's Services were forced to rethink how they continued to operate and provide services for children most in need. The improvement action plan was developed shortly before the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic and although strong progress has been made, delivery has nonetheless been impacted. This is being monitored by the Improvement Board

On lockdown, Children's Services needed to immediately prioritise activity. A risk assessment was undertaken on each child to establish how to plan for their safety and support. Visits and work with children and families have used virtual means of contact where possible, doorstep visits and home visits where necessary. Service delivery had to be adjusted to reflect public health guidance – building-based and group-based activities were largely stood down. Staff capacity was prioritised, for example redeploying colleagues to our residential children's homes. There has been an important additional focus on the education offer to vulnerable children, recognising the importance of learning and the protective benefit of school attendance in the protection and wellbeing of children. Colleagues have worked with flexibility and creativity to ensure children are safe and families are supported.

On 23 April 2020, the Department for Education (DfE) introduced a series of temporary regulatory flexibilities for local authorities and children's social care providers. The Regulations are due to expire on 25th September. The DfE are monitoring the use of the Regulations. Similarly other authorities, the Children Integrated Services Directorate have enacted a small number of easements.

This work had to be urgently prioritised ahead of delivering the improvement plan. In addition, Covid-19 lockdown some delay in being able to put in place improvement support and training programmes.

Covid-19 has had an impact on demand in Children's Services. Child protection plan admissions were high in February and March. The resultant number of children with a child protection plan in place has increased by 25% compared with the previous year. This increase is likely to be explained by high profile cases and an Ofsted inspection as opposed to the resultant impact of Covid-19. Higher child protection numbers often translate in to more children coming in to care too as with intervention and scrutiny more risks are often identified. The number of children in care has increased very significantly, during the period of lockdown and is receiving focused attention.

In addition, we know that Covid-19 has disproportionate impact and sadly, that our disadvantaged families will experience greater impact. Nottingham is the 6<sup>th</sup> most deprived city for children to grow up in according to measures of income deprivation (IDACI 2019). We will need to understand, as best as we are able to, how we best support our children and families as a wider council and partnership and what this means for service demands.

## **Risk**

Our programme of improvement is not a quick fix, reflecting the scale of changes we are making. (Essex are clear that their journey from 'inadequate' to 'outstanding' took 10 years). The biggest risk for us is failing to improve and we are acting strongly to mitigate this. However, we also need to ensure the improvement that we undertake is sustainable in challenging times.

The improvement fund has allowed the service to fill gaps in staffing and that is giving visible benefits in terms of caseloads, improved performance against key statutory requirements and the opportunity to implement practice changes. However, this is temporary funding and we need carefully to understand how we maintain improvements and the resourcing of priorities.

We need our practitioners and managers to be able to devote their attention wholeheartedly to the practice and improvement in a very short space of time. The core children's services have been excluded from the current voluntary redundancy process, but colleagues will still be concerned at the organisation's budgetary position and we are seeking to reassure them to avoid an impact on retention.

Many of the factors which support families and help ensure children are safeguarded and are visible have not been available as usual during lockdown, such as school, health services and informal support. There is major concern about the hidden harm which may emerge especially when schools come back in September. Nationally, a surge is expected in demand for children's services and we expect this to be experienced in Nottingham. Any increased demand will be a challenge for the service,

but this may sit alongside not only the demands of our improvement activity, but also the return of Ofsted for their assurance visit. This is a huge demand on the department.

Ofsted have recently announced their new regime of autumn assurance visits, given the pause in their usual inspection regime due to the pandemic. They will be visiting chosen local authorities to review how they have ensured outcomes for children under Covid-19. Their focus will include authorities with Priority Actions, like ourselves. This is a challenge for us as it is a broader scope than the follow-up Focused Visit we would normally have received. The team will also include an education inspector who will focus on the education experience of vulnerable children during Covid-19.

We have had a relatively short time to deliver tangible improvement and confidence in our ability as an authority to deliver improvement. Achieving fast and demonstrable improvement has been a challenge. Although the assurance visit will not provide a rating, it will determine how soon inspectors will return for a full inspection. Clearly we need to demonstrate safe services and improving outcomes for children and our aim is to create the confidence to allow us longer before our full inspection.

As set out in the previous report, the implications of an inadequate inspection outcome are that we would be failing to serve Nottingham's children. However, in addition it would also bring major external scrutiny with ministerial oversight and potential intervention. In addition, very substantial additional cost would be incurred.

### **The Role of the Corporate Parent**

As well as striving to meet the needs of children in the City, as Corporate Parents, we have a specific responsibility for our looked after children. We are and must remain committed to delivering better outcomes for children in our care, ensuring that our responsibilities as corporate parents are reflected in all aspects of the work of Nottingham City Council. Although this has not been explicitly part of our action plan, we are undertaking work to develop the opportunities we create as corporate parents of the children in our care. We have had an initial conversation with Executive Panel about reflecting on our existing commitments as corporate parents.

### **Next Steps**

We are now developing phase 2 of our action plan, based on the work we have been undertaking with our Partners in Practice. This will reflect, not just responding to the findings of the Focused Visit, but also developing the wider continuous improvement and culture change which we recognise is so essential for us to achieve our ambition for Nottingham's children's services to be recognised as good or better.

We recognise that securing good outcomes for children and young people in Nottingham is not just our children's services, but is about all the opportunities we can create for young people growing up in our vibrant, creative and diverse city. The Council is planning to work in partnership with Small Steps, Big Changes for Nottingham to become formally recognised as a Child Friendly City, under the UNICEF scheme. We are currently scoping this exciting initiative and will bring forward a detailed paper.

We will continue preparation for the Ofsted assurance visit and actions to address and further analyse demand in the service.

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.

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