

Meeting Title	Children and Young People’s Scrutiny Committee
Report Title	Ofsted Inspection of Children’s Services
Meeting Date	3 rd November 2022

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Portfolio Holder(s):	Councillor Cheryl Barnard
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<p>Summary of issues:</p> <p>The report provides the Board with the report published by Ofsted of its Inspection of Nottingham’s Children’s Services. It reflects the findings, the journey of improvement in the services and the next steps to secure sustainable improvements for children.</p> <p>Delivery of children’s services is a significant statutory duty for the council and a priority for the whole Council. The inspection by the regulator, Ofsted, provides an important assessment of the impact of services in terms of outcomes for children. There are formal regulatory consequences of the inspection outcome which need to be addressed. It is essential that the council takes the actions necessary to achieve the sustainable improvements required for children.</p>
<p>Recommendation(s):</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee consider the findings of Ofsted’s inspection of Children’s Services. 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. Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee note the actions taken since inspection and the next steps Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee note the development of an Improvement Plan and associated resource requirements.

1. Background

- Children’s Services represent some of the most important responsibilities of a council and as such are subject to a very robust regulatory regime. The services have been on a journey of improvement and the inspection is a significant benchmark for the council.
- Ofsted’s Inspection of Local Authority children’s services focus on the effectiveness of local authority services and arrangements:

- to help and protect children
- the experiences and progress of children in care wherever they live, including those children who return home
- the arrangements for permanence for children who are looked after, including adoption
- the experiences and progress of care leavers

1.3 The inspection also evaluates:

- the effectiveness of leaders and managers
- the impact they have on the lives of children and young people
- the quality of professional practice

1.4 The Inspection is unannounced and takes place over three weeks. The first week takes place off site where Ofsted review a suite of very detailed information about the service, including our self-assessment and performance data. Weeks two and three involved 6 inspectors working on site, understanding in detail our work with children and families.

1.5 Judgement gradings are inadequate, requires improvement, good and outstanding. Overall effectiveness will be limited to inadequate where the experiences of children who need help and protection are judged to be inadequate.

1.6 Nottingham’s Inspection of children’s services took place between 4th – 22nd July 2022. 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).

1.7 The report was published on 5th September. A copy of the inspection report can be found at [Ofsted | Nottingham City Council](#).

1.8 The inspection provides an assessment of the current quality of service delivery and clarity regarding the areas where services need to improve to ensure the provision of consistently good services for children and young people in Nottingham City.

1.9 The report is clear that whilst some progress has been made against previous priority actions, this progress has been too slow, and some other areas have deteriorated. This means that children in Nottingham City do not yet receive a consistently good service

and for some children at risk of harm this is not recognised quickly enough. The majority of children wait too long for decisions to be made regarding next steps when information is received in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH), this means that some children who have met threshold for social care intervention wait up to six weeks to be seen by a social worker.

- 1.10 The inspection feedback identified that the new leadership team is beginning to have a greater impact on practice through clarity on the expectations of all staff, and a developing culture that promotes good practice through high support and high challenge. However, the feedback was also clear that the scale of required improvements remains substantial, and the pace of change needs to quicken for all areas of the service to provide safe and consistently good services for children.
- 1.11 Children's Services are on an improvement journey. At an Ofsted Focused Visit in February 2020, although a grading is not provided, inspectors noted systemic failures and issued 2 priority actions and 4 areas for improvement. The progress that has been made is reflected within the report. The Children's Service's improvement plan will take a whole system approach to secure improvements and consistency of practice across a child's journey.
- 1.12 The inspection report references the improvement plan that was put in place to address the priority areas for improvement but notes the challenging context in which the Local Authority and its Children's Services was operating that has meant progress has been slow. It notes that elected members and the chief executive remain committed to improving the quality of children's services, despite the local authority's financial challenges. Further investment has been agreed to increase capacity to manage the demand and improve outcomes for children.
- 1.13 During this visit Inspectors noted the new senior leadership team and the enthusiasm and momentum to drive forward the changes needed. They feel that the new senior management team has a sound understanding of the challenges it faces and has already delivered some improvements and positive culture shifts. They note a new, knowledgeable Director of Integrated Children's Services is now in post, along with a committed new leadership team and acknowledge that this is beginning to have a greater impact on practice. They state there is clarity on the expectations of all staff, and leaders are developing a culture that promotes good practice through high support and high challenge.
- 1.14 However, they also note that the scale of required improvements remains substantial, and the pace of change needs to quicken for all areas of the service to provide safe and consistently good services for children.
- 1.15 The inspection feedback and report provide clarity regarding specific areas for improvement in the service. The feedback demonstrates that Nottingham is capable of delivering tangible improvements which make a difference for children; however, it is explicit that the pace of change has been too slow. It is now essential that the improvement work quickens to ensure sustainable progress across service delivery as it is this that will bring meaningful improvement which will make a positive difference for children. This in turn will mean that the council can be assured that its statutory duties in respect of children's services are not only met but are being delivered confidently with a focus on good outcomes.

1.16 The inspection outcome and findings are significant to the Safeguarding Children's Partnership. Partnership engagement is key to ensuring effective and robust multi-agency safeguarding arrangements and so will be integral to contributing to and supporting the improvements that are needed.

1.17 It is clear that our ambition must be that the services we deliver for children and young people in Nottingham are consistently good.

1.18 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.

2. Key messages relating to improvements needed in the service

2.1 There are significant challenges within the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) which have created a backlog in decision making for children meaning that for some children who need a social worker are waiting too long to be seen. There are some complicated systems within the MASH which are compounded by the volume of information sent to the MASH by partner agencies where parental consent has not been sought. This means that staff in MASH spend time seeking parental consent to proceed which causes delays in decision making.

2.2 The Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) team which responds to allegations against professionals needs strengthening meaning that there is better evidence of clear management oversight and that threshold decisions regarding this area of safeguarding are well recorded.

2.3 Consistency and quality of management oversight and supervision needs to improve across all service areas. Supervision needs to be reflective, show professional curiosity and drive forward assessments and plans for children.

- 2.4 Advice and guidance to children aged 16/17 who present as homeless needs to be strengthened to ensure suitable accommodation is provided to children in a timelier way which will ensure effective support is provided to a vulnerable cohort of children.
- 2.5 Where children go missing from home, return home interviews need to be timely and assessments and outcomes need to be strengthened so that they effectively contribute to the child's safety plan. This will mean that the service is using information from missing from home interviews to support effectively intervention and planning with children to reduce future risks.
- 2.6 There needs to be greater understanding and oversight for our children missing from education so as there is a fuller understand of any risks and clarity that appropriate safeguarding outcomes are considered.
- 2.7 Stability of our workforce is essential to support children forming trusted relationships with social workers. The amount of change in the workforce currently adversely affects children's ability to build and sustain those much-needed trusted relationships.
- 2.8 Assessments for children in long term foster care need to be consistently updated. This will ensure that plans address their needs and they receive the support that they need at the appropriate time.
- 2.9 More life story work needs to be completed with children who do not have an adoption plan. This will allow them to understand their history, their journey into care and are able to develop a sense of identity and feel proud of who they are.
- 2.10 All looked after children are appointed an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) who works independently of the child's social worker. Their role is to chair looked after child review meetings and monitor the care the child is getting and making sure that the care plan meets their needs and agreed actions are completed. IROs are not consistently monitoring children's circumstances in between formal reviews and are not escalating any concerns about progress, which means the effectiveness of the IRO oversight in ensuring children's needs are being met is not as robust as it could be.
- 2.11 Placement sufficiency is a challenge. There are occasions where a regulated placement (foster or residential) cannot be identified for a child and this results in emergency arrangements being made. This means that some children who would need a regulated placement are being placed in unregulated placements. Inspectors found that Senior managers are aware of children in such placements and maintain good oversight of these children.
- 2.12 Each local authority should ensure that all care leavers are informed of their rights and entitlements, which is contained in a document called 'the local offer'. Whilst the majority of care leavers are informed of their rights and entitlements, the published

local offer is outdated and needs to be updated. The updated local offer needs to be clear as to the rights and entitlements for care leavers aged 21-25 to ensure their needs are being met and they receive the support to which they are entitled, to enable a successful transition into adulthood.

3. Key Messages related to areas of progress or strengths in practice

- 3.1 Once children are allocated to a social worker, assessments are timely, risks to children's safety and wellbeing are fully understood by all partners and appropriate action is taken to reduce risks to children. Children are visited appropriately, and direct work is undertaken with the family to understand the child's experiences and ensure that work is focussed on addressing risks and improving outcomes for the child.
- 3.2 Where children's circumstances are not improving clear authoritative action is taken to take children into care to secure their welfare and ensure they do not remain too long in neglectful conditions.
- 3.3 Social workers develop strong relationships with children and their families and understand the needs of the children they work with. This allows children and families to build a trusted relationship which enables the social worker to understand the child's circumstances and work more effectively to reduce the risks to the child.
- 3.4 Where children are at risk of exploitation their assessment recognises the risks to their safety and plans to address these are appropriate. These are updated as risks change, enabling appropriate action to mitigate risks to be taken.
- 3.5 Where children need to be placed for adoption, they are now being matched with adopters more quickly and siblings are being adopted together. This allows children to achieve stability and maintains their sibling relationship and support network. There is good working with Adoption East Midlands to support this effective matching of children to adopters. Long term fostering opportunities are ensuring children receive good quality consistent care as they would do from a birth parent.
- 3.6 Family time is carefully considered and takes account of children's views, ensuring children maintain family ties in a supportive way following a full assessment of risks.
- 3.7 The emotional and mental health needs of children in care are being met. They can access direct support and counselling to support them with their emotional and mental health.
- 3.8 Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) often have differing practical and emotional support needs given their experiences prior to their arrival in the UK. The support offered is appropriate and tailored to their individual needs, offering emotional and practical support to aid their transition.
- 3.9 Care leavers are allocated a personal advisor when they are 17.5 years old. This allows time for positive relationships to be built prior to them turning 18, which means that they have a trusted adult to support them move into adulthood. This has allowed many care leavers to build long standing relationships with their personal advisor and gives them a person they can turn to when they need support. Most care leavers understand their rights and entitlements and so can tap into appropriate support when they need it.

- 3.10 Care leavers are supported to access accommodation suitable to their needs – whether this be remaining with their former foster carer in a Staying Put arrangements, semi independent accommodation to provide additional support that they may need, or their own tenancy. This ensures care leavers are appropriately supported with a transition into independent living at a pace that suits their needs.
- 3.11 Partnership working at a strategic and operational level are positive and seek to provide the best outcomes for children and young people.

4. Next Steps

- 4.1 Children's Services have an improvement plan and are revising it to address the eight areas of improvement as well as other areas of focus identified within the inspection report to continue to secure whole system improvement. Delivering the improvements set out in the plan will be a priority for the council.
- 4.2 We will submit our Improvement Plan to Ofsted as required, within 70 working days of the publication of the inspection report.
- 4.3 Ofsted will undertake Monitoring Visits – short inspection activity focused on a specific area – between now and the next inspection. We can expect 3 or 4 each year.
- 4.4 Two inspectors will usually carry out each monitoring visit, which will last for 2 days. The focus of the visits will be upon areas where improvement is most needed, but Inspectors will also check that performance in other areas has not deteriorated. The on-site activity will usually focus upon the experience of children and young people within the area being inspected. A summary of the inspection findings will be given at the end of each visit.
- 4.5 Ofsted inform the Department for Education (DfE), as the improvement agency, of the outcome of the inspection outcome, which will determine the approach to improvement assurance which it will require.
- 4.6 The Council's self-assessment reflected clarity about the need to continue to improve Children's Services. Actions were in train prior to inspection and further action has been taken following the inspection:
- Revising the Children's Services improvement plan to strengthen activity to address the areas of improvement.
 - The Children at the Heart Improvement Board will be chaired by an Independent Chair commissioned through the Department for Education to provide a level of independence and challenge to the delivery of the improvement plan.
 - As noted in the inspection report, the service has accelerated its change and improvement work within the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH). Front line worker capacity has been increased and additional resources have been secured to increase service manager capacity to drive and oversee the work of the team and ensure consistency in application of thresholds and decision making.
 - Secured additional resources for the Missing from Home team to enable timely return home interviews and quality assessments that feed into a robust safety plan.

- Commenced a review of the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) arrangements.
- A recruitment and retention package has been agreed to stabilise the workforce, reduce reliance on agency social workers and reduce workloads.
- Secured places for all social work Team Managers to complete the Pathways leadership programme. This will be delivered by Frontline who have been awarded a delivery contract by the DfE to support social work leadership programmes. The programme will empower leaders to model and develop excellent social work practice and leadership in others and is centred on developing knowledge, skills and expertise against the 4C leadership capability framework (expanding capacity, maintaining curiosity, providing clarity, managing complexity).
- A training package for the newly formed Head of Service group and action learning sets for service managers will be delivered over the Autumn through money secured from the Department for Education. These will focus on how to improve quality and performance in a social work environment.