

Meeting Title	Children and Young People’s Scrutiny Committee
Report Title	Ofsted Local Authority 2 nd Monitoring Visit of Nottingham Report
Meeting Date	28 September 2023

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Portfolio Holder(s):	Councillor Cheryl Barnard
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<p>Summary of issues:</p> <p>Children’s Services represent some of the most important responsibilities of a council and as a result are subject to a very robust regulatory regime. In July 2022 Nottingham City Children’s Services received its full Inspection of Local Authority Children’s Services (ILACS), which led to an inadequate judgement. As a result, Children’s Services have now entered a monitoring visit regime.</p> <p>On 25th and 26th July 2023 a second monitoring visit with a focus of Children in Need and Children with a Child Protection Plan (including disabled children) took place. This report provides some context to the monitoring visit regime and presents the findings of the narrative letter published by Ofsted of its second monitoring visit 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>Recommendation(s):</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee consider the findings of Ofsted’s 2nd Monitoring Visit of Children’s Services. 2. 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. 3. Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee note the progress made since the full inspection and the next steps

1. Background

Delivery of children’s services is a significant statutory duty for the council and a priority for the whole Council. It is essential that the council takes the actions necessary to achieve sustainable good outcomes for children. In July 2022 Nottingham City Children’s Services received its Inspection of Local Authority Children’s Services (ILACS), at which the authority was judged to be inadequate. This means that the Local Authority has entered a series of monitoring visits – short 2-day inspections focussed upon areas where inspectors feel improvements are most needed, based upon the priority areas identified within the ILACS report.

The first of these visits took place on 28th February / 1st March 2023 and was focused on the immediate response to children in need of help and protection. Inspectors on that occasion reviewed the authority's 'Front Door' (Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub, Duty and Assessment and Brief Intervention Teams, as well as our response to 16/17-year olds presenting as homeless). The first letter is not published on the Ofsted website, but local authorities can disseminate the letter at their discretion. A report was presented at that time to Corporate Leadership Team and the Executive Panel and was shared with the Scrutiny committee members, detailing the findings of that visit. In summary, Inspectors noted that there had been improvements since the July 2022 ILACS visit:

- Senior leaders had taken appropriate action, identified the things that need to change, and some actions had been taken swiftly. They noted that senior leaders had clear oversight and knowledge of performance in the first response service and had appropriately invested resources, including an increase in workforce capacity and management oversight.
- This was noted to have had a positive impact on staff morale as their workloads have become more manageable, which in turn had led to recent improvements in the timeliness and quality of responses to children when they present as being in need of help and protection at the 'front door'.
- In particular, inspectors noted that there has been a strong improvement in the service response to children aged 16 and 17 who present to the MASH as homeless since the previous inspection.
- Inspectors acknowledged that senior leaders recognised that work needs to continue to sustain and continue the early progress and there are further areas for improvement, such as continuing to improve the timeliness in visits to children and the consistency of the quality of children's assessments.
- Inspectors reinforced the importance of partnership and wider council responsibilities in ensuring that children receive an appropriate and timely response is also a partnership and wider Council responsibility. The inspection confirmed that we have further work to do with our partners to ensure the timeliness of response to children presenting in need of help and protection is not delayed, such as partner agencies obtaining consent from families before they submit an email or multi-agency referral form (MARF) to request support for children and ensuring the quality of information submitted by partners on the MARFs is consistent. We will also need to work with the police to improve their response to children who have experienced incidents of domestic abuse – in terms of timeliness of information shared and attendance at the daily multi-agency high-risk domestic abuse meetings to consider the risks to children.

Those findings were a positive first step and acknowledgement of the progress that was starting to be made. Since then Children's Services received their second monitoring visit on 25th and 26th July 2023. This report presents the findings of that visit.

2. Findings of the second monitoring visit

On 25th and 26th July 2023, Nottingham City Children's Services received its second monitoring visit under the Ofsted inspection framework for children's services judged inadequate. This visit was focused upon Children in Need and Children with Child Protection Plans, including disabled children. As a result, the visit was primarily focused upon our

Fieldwork and Whole Life Disability Services. A copy of the letter detailing the monitoring visit findings is attached at appendix 1.

Inspectors noted that there are early signs of tangible improvements in both the fieldwork practice and the environment in which staff work as a result of a committed and stable leadership team and investment in agency staffing to stabilise the workforce and reduce caseloads. This means that children can build strong relationships with their workers, who have a good understanding of children's needs. Children are visited regularly, and often more frequently than the minimum amount set out in their plan, meaning visits are based upon needs and support positive progression of the plan for children. It was noted that the quality assurance and performance framework had been strengthened and is being embedded and is supporting leaders to focus upon further strengthening practice and learning. Supervision is taking place regularly and staff feel supported.

Inspectors found that there are some areas of continued challenge around retention of social workers leading to a change in worker for some children. This impacts upon their ability to build trusting relationships with their worker. Inspectors also noted the need to develop consistency in practice across the workforce in areas such as the quality of recording, planning, reviewing actions routinely to evidence progress, ensuring parents receive reports in good time, as well as ensuring a consistent use of the supervision tool to provide evidence of challenge and progression of children's plans. It was also noted that waiting lists for services impacted upon children's plans progressing.

The inspection team observed that senior leaders were aware of the areas for further development and have a focus on the wider areas of transformation across the service and wider partnership.

These findings provide an important benchmark in our journey of improvement and taken together with the first monitoring visit demonstrate that improvements in our response to children in need of help and protection have been made.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that there are some significant risks to sustaining the progress made and continuing to make the necessary improvements. As noted within the findings, the leadership team acknowledge that improvements need to be sustainable, which is set against a backdrop of workforce instability and reliance upon agency staffing – a nationwide challenge for children's services. Maintaining staffing levels remains challenging, not just locally but nationally, where the recruitment and retention of experienced social workers is difficult, and services rely heavily upon agency staffing.

The service is also making practice improvements at the same time as its wider Children's Services Transformation programme, which presents a risk to maintaining focus on the 'at pace' improvements that need to be made. Whilst both work programmes are working closely and in tandem, the capacity, ability and pace of change required means making and sustaining changes as well as sustaining staff energy and morale is challenging, especially when a stable workforce is challenging to achieve. It is also important to acknowledge that the Children's Service's Improvement and Transformation programmes also sit within the significant wider Council change programme and the budgetary pressures that the authority faces.

3. Next Steps

Although Ofsted's findings were in line with the service understanding of its progress, there will be a further review and update of the Children's Services improvement plan to ensure

that areas for improvement are addressed and strengths are built upon. As noted within the findings the improvement plan has regular oversight and governance from the Children's Executive Improvement and Partnership Boards and these Boards will continue to provide ongoing governance. A copy of the Monitoring Visit letter has been shared with the Boards and with the Improvement and Assurance Board via Sir Tony Redmond.

As noted above the service has entered a period of monitoring visits - and can anticipate between 3 – 4 visits a year until our next full ILACS inspection in approximately 18- 24 months' time. The focus of the next 2 visits is anticipated to be to our Children and Care and Care Leavers Services, with the first of these expected before the end of the year.

Similarly, to the Fieldwork Service the Children in Care teams are undertaking a significant piece of transformation work in tandem with its improvement work, notably around ensuring we have the right care settings for children when they need these. Ensuring sufficiency in placements for children feeds into the wider medium-term financial plan and Council budgetary pressures. This is therefore a key focus for the service and wider Council.

Whilst the service is working hard to deliver tangible improvements to outcomes for children in care and care leavers, the service is facing a number of vulnerabilities to delivering sustained and consistent improvements, which the leadership team and wider Council are seeking to address. The service has invested in additional Personal Advisor capacity to reduce caseloads to allow care leavers to build trusting and meaningful relationships with care leavers. However, recruiting to these posts has taken longer than desired, due to a lack of suitable candidates.

Within the children in care service the turnover of staff has had a negative impact on caseloads and children, with some children experiencing a change of social worker too often. Senior leaders have attempted to mitigate this through the recruitment of agency front line staff and agency service managers, to enable greater oversight of outcomes for children and young people, but this remains a challenge for the service, similar to the national picture.

In addition, the service has been successful in obtaining some Department for Education funding to support its improvement journey and to support additional capacity around its improvement journey.