

Meeting Title	Children and Young People’s Scrutiny Committee
Report Title	Children’s Services Improvement
Meeting Date	24 th January 2024

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Portfolio Holder(s):	Councillor Cheryl Barnard
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Summary of issues:

This report provides an update of the progress of the Children’s Integrated Services improvement and transformation journey since the inadequate judgement following the Inspection of Local Authority Children’s Services (ILACS) in July 2022.

- Recommendation(s):**
1. Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee consider the findings of the last three Ofsted Monitoring Visits.
 2. Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee note the progress made since the Inspection of Local Authority Children’s Services in July 2022 and the next steps
 3. 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

1. Background

1.1 Committee will be aware that Nottingham City Children’s Services received an Ofsted ILACS inspection in July 2022 with the report being published in September 2022 (appendix 1). 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).
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It is of note that Ofsted inspect all the 153 local authority children's services in England and that only 8.5% (13) local authorities children's services are currently delivering inadequate services to children in their local areas.

1.2 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.

1.3.1 On 12th December 2022, the local authority submitted an action plan to Ofsted which addressed the inspection findings. Ofsted formally responded on 19th December 2022 confirming that the action plan accurately reflected the findings of the inspection. The Ofsted Action plan is monitored through the Children's Improvement Board, which is chaired by an independent Department for Education Improvement Advisor. The Children's Improvement Board has been restructured to form a monthly Executive Improvement Board and quarterly Partnership Improvement Board.

1.3.2 The monthly Executive Improvement Board focusses largely on improving the performance of the Council's Children's Services following the Ofsted inspection. It supports the work of the Board in delivering children's services in Nottingham that result in consistently good outcomes for children, young people and their families. The Executive Improvement Board membership includes the Portfolio Lead Member with responsibility for Children, Young People and Education, the Chief Executive as well as senior leaders, ensuring robust monthly senior leadership oversight of progress improvements. The quarterly partnership board has oversight of the progress being made by internal services as well as in the broader children's partnership. The Partnership Board is made up of senior partnership leaders in addition to the Executive Improvement Board members.

- 1.5 In addition to the monthly monitoring of the Ofsted improvement plan through the Improvement Board, the division has an internal process to ensure robust delivery and accountability. Programme management support and resources are being provided to each Head of Service to support delivery of the plan and ensure deadlines are met and evidence of impact is being gathered. Internal monitoring of progress of the Ofsted action plan and wider transformation plan is delivered through a monthly programme board, which is chaired by the Service Director for Children’s Integrated Services. This reports to the Corporate Director through a monthly Oversight and Assurance Meeting which she chairs.
- 1.6 As a result of the inadequate judgement the Local Authority has entered into a period of Monitoring Visits. These are 2 day on site visits focused upon a specific area of practice. Judgements are not provided, but a narrative letter of findings is produced. The first letter is not published, but all subsequent letters are published on the Ofsted Website. To date the service has received 3 Monitoring Visits:
- The Front Door (MASH, Duty and EDT) – February 2023 (appendix 2)
 - Children in Need and Children with a Child Protection Plan – July 2023 (appendix 3)
 - Care Leavers aged 18+ - November 2023 (appendix 4)
- 1.7 A programme of Children’s Transformation activity has been running in conjunction with the improvement work being undertaken in the service. Both are significant pieces of work but both work programmes complement each other, with the transformation activity supporting the service delivery on its wider improvement work. The diagram below shows how both service development and practice improvements work with the transformation projects to deliver effective sustainable services:



2. Improvement Journey Progress

- 2.1 Following each of the three monitoring visits inspectors have noted evidence of tangible progress being made with some areas of ‘strong’ improvement being noted across the 3 visits. As anticipated inspectors have also noted areas where further focus is required but have been clear that these are areas of which senior leaders are aware and have clear plans for further improvement.
- 2.2 Inspectors have noted the continued progression of the ‘Changing Lives’ Changing Futures’ programme and could see the interlink between the transformation and

improvement strands and the positive impact this as having in improving the quality of practice and staff morale.

2.3 There have been common themes and areas of progression across the three visits. Inspectors could see:

- Investment in posts to increase front line and management capacity, which has helped manage workload and demand, increase management oversight, reduce caseloads and improve staff morale.
- The workforce feels supported by managers and can feel the positive impact that reduced caseloads are having, enabling them to deliver best practice.
- Staff develop strong and meaningful relationships with their children and young people, know them well and act as good parents. This enables them to assess children and young people's needs to offer good support, particularly to our more vulnerable children and care leavers (such as disabled children, care leavers with additional needs and 16- and 17-year olds who present as homeless). Processes (such as child in need review meetings, visits etc) often take place sooner than the statutory minimum to meet the needs of the child, young person or family, meaning that children and young people are seen or have their circumstances reviewed in timescales appropriate to them.
- There is a committed senior leadership team who have clear oversight and knowledge of performance within service areas, and recently developed dashboards are enabling managers and front line staff understand performance and prioritise tasks that need to be completed, leading to timelier responses for children and families.
- The quality assurance framework has been strengthened and is being embedded. This is correctly identifying areas for improvement and development to help further strengthen practice and learning.

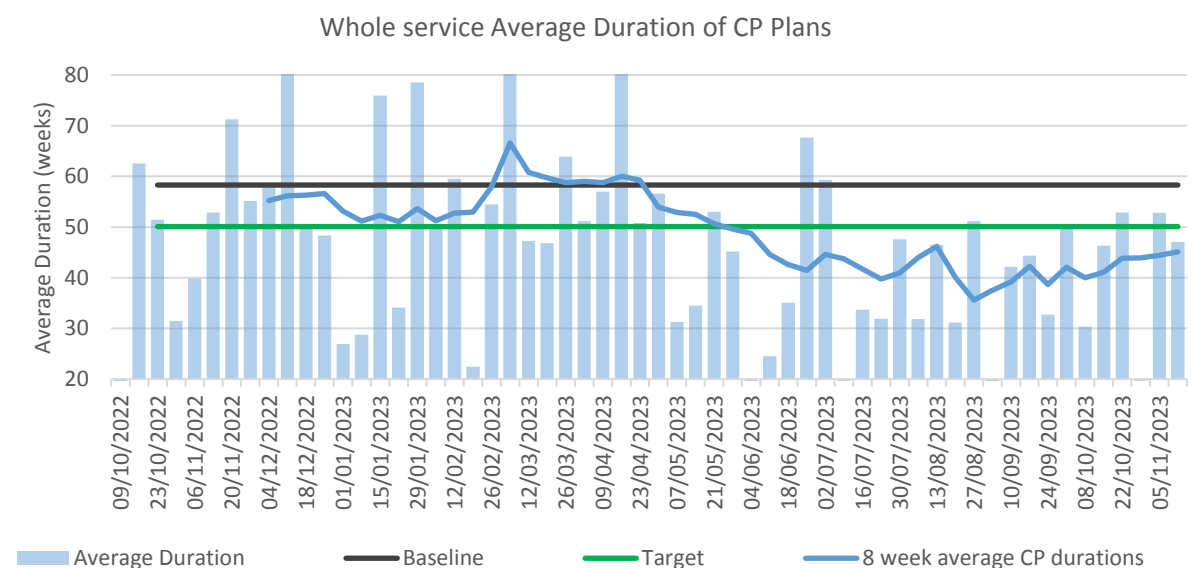
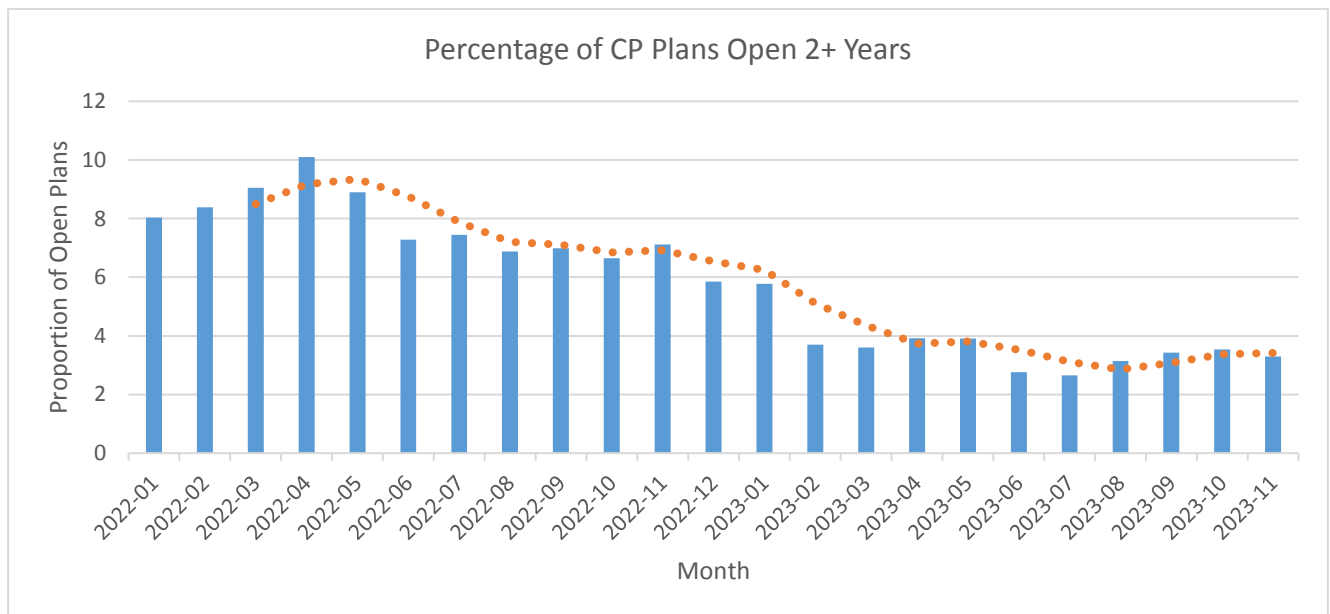
2.4 Inspectors noted that there were further common areas for development, which aligned with the service's self-evaluation of practice:

- Inconsistency in quality of assessments or plans.
- Inconsistency in the frequency and quality of supervision to help progress outcomes for children in a timely way.
- Some children and young people experience too many changes of social worker – due to difficulties around recruitment and retention of staff – an issue being experienced not only in Nottingham but nationally.
- Further work with partners needed to reduce delays in assessment and intervention which some children and families continue to experience.

2.5 Whilst the service has been making improvements through its wider service development plan, which was drawn up following the ILACS inspection, the transformation programme has been running alongside and supported this work move at pace by providing additional focus and tools to support the process. Progress against these areas has resulted in reduced demand and lower caseloads which has

enabled a focus on quality practice. This has supported cultural change, which has then in turn enabled the cultural change to provide further momentum to the improvement and transformation through increased staff morale and improved staff retention.

2.6 One of the areas noted within the ILACS inspection was the drift and delay to progressing outcomes for children and young people. As well as forming part of the service improvement plan, this was also one of the workstreams under the transformation programme. As a result of the focus, there have been significant reductions in the number of children with a child protection plan (from 7.7% to 3.3%) and where children do have a child protection plan, the length of time they are on a plan has reduced significantly (58 weeks to 44 weeks).

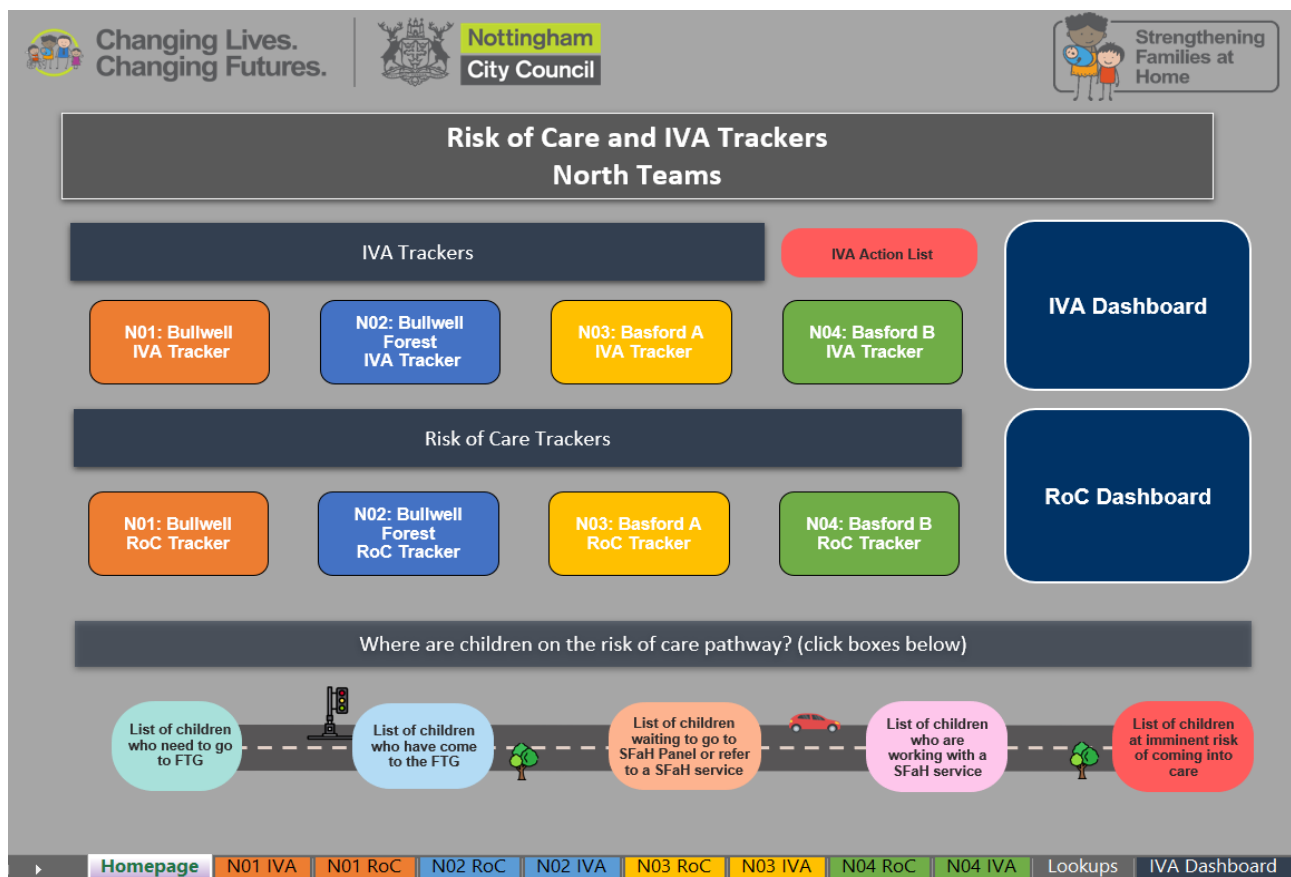


2.7 These improvements have been brought about through sustained work drive by the improvement plan, with activity such as increased managed oversight through regular

oversight panels, with further support provided through the transformation workstream in the form of additional tools to support management oversight, such as management dashboards.

2.8 Likewise placing children in care in family placements to enable them to stay within a family environment and achieve stronger outcomes has been a focus of improvement but supported with the tools and support of the transformation preventing long term care starts workstream. This has resulted in the number of children being supported to remain with family increasing from 32% in January 2023 to 40% in November 2023. This has been largely due to the transformation focus on supporting the roll out of family network meetings to identify appropriate family members who can offer support. The transformation work has also supported with a senior manager dashboard to support weekly management oversight of children at risk of coming into care or at risk of harm. These in turn support the caseload dashboard which allows case managers to prioritise their workload and tasks. An example of one of the management dashboard tools is below:

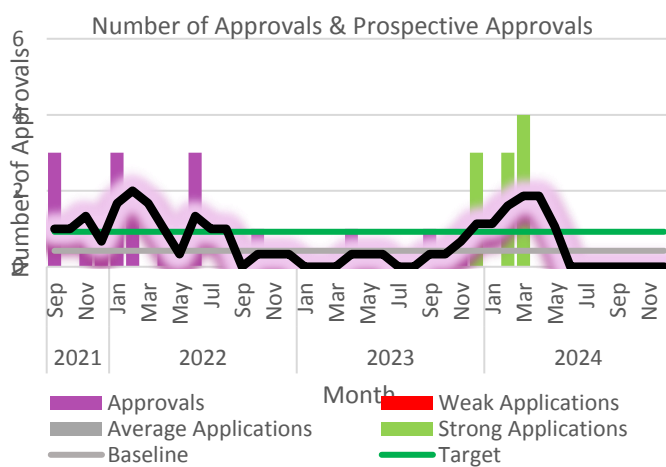
Risk of care and Initial Viability Assessment Tracker dashboard:



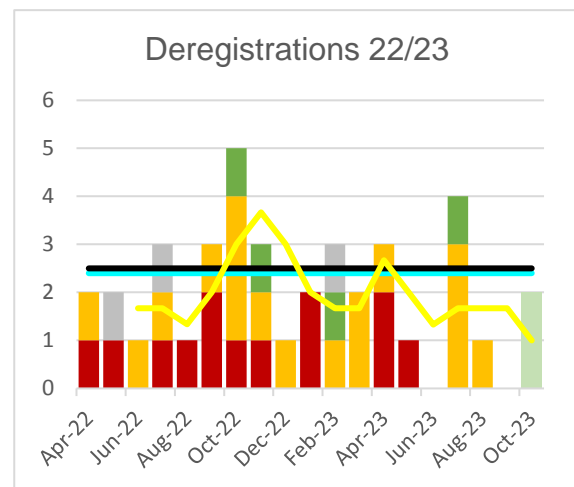
2.9 A further key focus of the improvement journey has been to ensure that children are in the right placement type to meet their needs. This includes reducing the number of children in residential children's homes, which do not always produce the best outcomes for children and are high cost. We have done this through a number of initiatives including the implementation of a panel specifically looking at children in residential care and overseeing their transition to foster carer or reunification if this is assessed to be in their best interests. Those children moving to in-house carers are supported by the new Fostering Support Service and Out of Hours service.

2.10 Those moving to Independent Fostering Agency carers may qualify for support from the STARS project. The STARS project is a social impact bond project which provides a range of support services, including step down from residential to foster care. Weekly meetings between the relevant services look at all children who need a new provision. This also dovetailed with one of the transformation workstreams, which has been focussed upon improving the recruitment, retention and utilisation of foster carers. With new ways of working, a marketing resource and effective tracking systems the service is on course to recruit 12 more foster carers by the end of the year and are on course to lose 10 fewer foster carers and increased utilisation of carers by 7%. This will support more children being placed with foster carers – producing better outcomes for children, supporting them to stay close to home in a family environment, but also reducing the reliance on expensive residential home placements, reducing service and council budget pressures.

Recruitment



Retention



2.11 Both the improvement and transformation work has had a positive impact upon the workload and caseloads, which has improved morale by enabling staff and managers to focus on delivering quality intervention to children and families. This has in turn supported a culture change across the service ranging from the engagement of staff with the improvement and transformation journey, increased management oversight and better engagement with partner agencies to support delivery of outcomes for children and families. Staff feel engaged in, and part of, the improvement and transformation work and this has helped quicken the pace of change.

2.12 This has worked well within First Response where learning and themes from quality assurance, has fed into monthly action learning sets. This monthly forum with staff, managers and the Head of Service allows team members to share issues they are worried about and delivers key practice messages and has helped create a culture where learning is shared by all. The reduction in the caseloads brought about by the timeliness of response has enabled the management team to create a learning environment where staff feel connected to the senior management team and enabled a shared vision and common goal to be established and worked towards. The action learning sets are supported by the monthly quality assurance and dip sampling that takes place with learning from those feeding into the action learning sets. This is backed up by weekly performance clinics where themes and trends in key performance information can be identified and any barriers unblocked in a timely way.

"I feel like we're working far less in silo. I know all the high-risk families that the other managers in my area are working with, and feel like we can learn from each other and help each other out"

Fieldwork Team manager

"Last year, it felt like I was doing everything on my own at times, but now we've got a much more streamlined approach, so we're so much more on top of it and can find placements for children a lot easier. I feel like I've got a lot more back up now"

Duty Lead

- 2.13 Since February 2023, the service has been operating its 'Shout Out' nominations and awards – celebrating success across the service. This has been well received by staff and has further improved staff satisfaction and morale by recognising and valuing the work of teams and individuals.



- 2.14 The service has been working closely with Human Resources to review and improve its advertising of opportunities and the recruitment processes. There has been a focus on advertising routes and material, with the production of a recruitment video, improved adverts and supporting information and social media targeting. Rolling recruitment takes place to ensure that applicants are interviewed quickly. This is then supported by a more streamlined process once an applicant has been successful, with a reduction in time between interview and start date. In addition, due to the progress being made and the real sense of culture change we have seen some agency workers convert to permanent establishment. As a result of the recruitment activity, improving staff morale, increased staff retention and reducing caseloads, the service has been able to reduce reliance on agency staffing in some of its teams. Within Fieldwork agency staffing has reduced from 17 last year to 6 agency workers currently engaged. First Response has been able to release the agency project team that it had engaged to manage demand and now has no agency workers within the service.

- 2.15 It is significant that the transformation work has become business as usual within the service for the last 4 months and has been led and owned by the service facilitated and supported by Newton Europe colleagues, making the approach sustainable.

3. Areas for further development, challenges and next steps

- 3.1 The service is on an improvement journey and, although clear improvements have been made, there remain areas for further development. Encouragingly inspectors identified the same areas for improvement that have been identified by the service in its self-evaluation, leading them to note that the service knows itself well and has clear plans for further progression.
- 3.2 Areas of practice inconsistency continue to form part of the wider service development plan. Some of the work to improve consistency in practice has been supported by our transformation partner, in the form of a service away day with the care leavers service and scoping the views of care leavers as to what they would like to see in their plans. The ongoing improvements will continue to build on this. Department for Education funding is enabling ongoing team development days to build upon learning from quality assurance to support the continued learning culture to focus on continually improving practice. This is bringing teams together to focus on what good practice looks like and encourage team engagement in how to improve practice consistency.

Photos from some of the activity undertaken with care leavers:

Pathway planning session with care leavers



Building the Bridges conference with care leavers and businesses



- 3.3 Work is ongoing with partners to support them understand the Thresholds of Need to reduce the numbers of children referred to the service, where alternative early help services would be more appropriate. This is being supported by the launch of the Early Help Strategy and website, with the aim that children and families will be able to access timelier support more appropriate to their needs when they require it, reducing escalation to more costly statutory services.



- 3.4 Whilst inspectors have been encouraged by the progress and senior leader commitment they have seen, following each monitoring visit they have sounded a note of caution as to the sustainability of the change, given the fragile nature of the resource put in place and the budgetary challenges facing the Authority. First Response and Fieldwork have been able to reduce caseloads and workload through the improvements that have been made, which will support ongoing sustainability. However, this will remain challenging in the care leavers service and the children in care teams due to the interim nature of the increased staffing and management capacity, the turnover of staff within the service and the number of children in care, which will mean caseloads remain higher than desirable for the years ahead and will lead to increased numbers of young adults leaving care who are eligible for care leaving services. Reliance on agency staffing in the children in care teams is higher than in other services (32% as opposed to 11% in Fieldwork services), meaning more children experience several changes of social worker, limiting their ability to build trusting relationships with their social worker.
- 3.5 To mitigate some of the challenges, the service is using its data to profile the numbers of children in care to predict the number of young adults who will be eligible for leaving

care service to see whether service re profiling can support the changing profile of the caseloads.

- 3.6 Work remains ongoing with human resources to support robust recruitment and retention activity to make Nottingham City the Authority of choice for Social Workers and Personal Advisors to create stability in the workforce.
- 3.7 Nevertheless the sustainability of progress to date and the pace of change will remain fragile given the current budgetary and governance pressures that the Council is facing. This will potentially come into sharp focus with the next monitoring visit, which is anticipated to be in the Children in Care service by the end of the financial year. The service is unable to meet the challenges alone and a whole Council approach will be vital to demonstrate to inspectors that the service is enabled to make sustainable and at pace changes ahead of its anticipated full inspection in 2025.