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Dear Catherine

Monitoring visit to Nottingham City children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Nottingham City children's services on 28 February to 1 March 2023. This was the first monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in July 2022. His Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Julie Knight and Margaret Burke.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the following areas of concern identified at the last inspection:

- Timeliness and effectiveness of the first response service when children are presented as potentially in need of help and protection.
- The timeliness and effectiveness of responses to those children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless.
- Workforce capacity, and the quality of supervision and management oversight.
- The impact of leaders on practice, including quality assurance processes.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

Headline findings

A committed permanent senior leadership team is driving forward its improvement and transformation plan for children's services, developed in response to the findings of the previous inspection. Senior leaders now have a clear oversight and knowledge of performance in the first response service and have appropriately invested resources, including an increase in workforce capacity and management oversight. This is resulting in 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'. Senior leaders know that this is the beginning of improvement in services for

children and that there is more to do to ensure sustainability and continuation of this early progress.

Findings and evaluation of progress

When children need help and protection, there has been recent improvement to the timeliness of response to children's contacts when information about children is sent to the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH), in the first response service. Senior leaders' investment in an additional eight social work permanent posts in the MASH is helping to manage the increase in demand for support for children, which has remained relatively high since September 2022. The creation of a dedicated service manager post provides additional management oversight and capacity for the MASH and Emergency Duty Team (EDT) service. This increase in capacity is having a positive impact on staff morale as their workloads have become more manageable and as a result this is having a positive impact on improving the timeliness in response for children.

The implementation of a new prioritisation system in the MASH since November 2022 has provided a structure which helps workers understand and prioritise risks to children. Family support workers and social workers are using it consistently to support their decision-making. While contacts receive swift oversight and direction from an advanced social work practitioner or team manager, decisions on progressing some contacts does not happen quickly enough and too much time is taken regathering information that may already be known about children from their family history.

Partner agencies do not always obtain consent from families before they submit an email or multi-agency referral form (MARF) to request support for children. This can lead to delays for children receiving the right help quickly, as family support and social workers in the MASH have to spend too much time seeking consent from families. In addition, the quality of information submitted by partners on the MARFs is inconsistent, with limited detail or focus on children's needs or the impact of their current circumstances on their welfare.

When children have experienced incidents of domestic abuse, information from the police takes too long to be sent through to the MASH. This means there is a delay in social workers being able to establish current risks and harm to children. Often, the best moment to engage meaningfully with families can be lost due to the passage of time. The MASH appropriately holds daily multi-agency high-risk domestic abuse meetings to consider the risks to children. Since December 2022, police have not been in attendance at these meetings due to their lack of capacity in the MASH, which leads to delays in information-sharing and decisions on next steps for children.

Once a decision is made on next steps for children, the response from the MASH is mostly appropriate. However, lots of requests for support or signposting are coming through the first response service unnecessarily. Often, contacts come into the MASH

for early help services that could be accessed directly in the community. Senior leaders' Changing Lives Changing Futures improvement programme seeks to address this as part of a new early help strategy and service design, but this is currently in the early stages of development.

Children aged 16 and 17 who present to the MASH as homeless receive an appropriate and quick response to meet their needs. This is a strong area of improvement since the previous inspection, as children are now made aware of their rights and entitlements. A homeless protocol, in partnership with housing agencies, has been refreshed and joint assessments of children's needs are completed when appropriate to do so. Advocacy support for children will be available from April 2023 and is being implemented in response to children's feedback. A live tracker is in place to monitor all new referrals, and this is monitored by the 16- and 17-year-old homeless panel, which has oversight and reviews children's needs regularly.

Once children are identified in the MASH as needing help and/or protection, they transfer to one of four duty and assessment teams for a child and family assessment. Following the previous inspection, caseloads of duty and assessment teams social workers became unmanageable due to the high demand for services coming through the MASH. To help manage this demand, senior leaders have commissioned a temporary additional duty and assessment team. The additional duty and assessment team consists of five social workers and one team manager and the team has been in place since late November 2022.

While this additional team is contributing to the recent improvement in the timeliness of responses for children, there are still delays in some children being visited when an assessment of need is identified. When children are allocated for an assessment, they are visited by social workers more quickly than at the time of the previous inspection. However, the appropriate local authority target of visiting children within five days from the contact being made to the MASH is not consistently being achieved. Timescales for visits to children are being monitored by senior leaders. However, the consequence for those children where there is delay means unknown risks being identified.

Social workers in the duty and assessment service report that their current caseloads and workloads have recently become much more manageable. Workers are having more time to complete children's assessments, which is having a positive impact on the assessment quality and on staff morale. While this is an improving trajectory, senior leaders recognise that more work needs to be done to further improve the timeliness in visits to children and the sustainability of the current additional staffing arrangements.

Children are visited regularly by social workers completing assessments and when appropriate to do so, children are seen alone. Direct work with children is completed by social workers who demonstrate a sensitive and caring approach to the child to understand their world and their views. They make creative efforts to ensure that

children have the opportunity to express their views and wishes. Although the social workers are involved with children for a short period of time, when they speak about children, they know them well.

The quality of children's assessments is inconsistent across the duty and assessment service. Some children's assessments are comprehensive and social workers demonstrate professional curiosity that helps to inform their analysis about children's needs and risks. However, some assessments are overly focused on the presenting need and not sufficiently considering the impact of children's family history. As a result, some children experience a second assessment in a short period of time because not all risks and needs have been previously identified. More recent assessments are of a stronger quality.

When risks to children increase, there is appropriate escalation to convening a multi-agency strategy meeting. The majority of meetings have the right professionals in attendance to share information about children's needs and risks. Strategy meetings are not always timely, and some delays have been due to a lack of staff and partner agency capacity. As a result, some interventions for children may not be actioned quickly enough. Safety planning and timely visits by workers help to keep an oversight of children until strategy meetings are held.

When children need help and protection out of office hours, social workers in the Emergency Duty Team (EDT) service take appropriate action to ensure children's immediate safety and well-being. EDT social workers have access to children's records, which gives them the ability to record their involvement, and this helps ensure that the daytime MASH and duty and assessment teams are able to see quickly what intervention has taken place out of office hours.

Workers are generally positive about working for Nottingham City, and social workers spoke of the positive impact of the additional capacity in the front door, which is helping with staff morale. Staff talked about being burnt out until the recent additional resources were provided, and there is some uncertainty about sustainability so that current workloads and caseloads remain manageable. Senior leaders know that recruitment and retention of staff are critical to the development of the improvement and transformation plans, and this is priority work in progress.

Staff feel supported by their teams and team managers, and workforce stability is slowly improving. The quality of management oversight across the first response service and staff supervision is not always sufficiently reflective of children's circumstances, needs and risk. The introduction of management review at the 10-day point of assessment is helping to keep timescales on track.

Senior leaders have taken appropriate action and identified the right things in the first response service that need to change. The improvement action plan has regular oversight and governance from the Children's Executive Improvement and Partnership Boards. While some actions have been undertaken swiftly, senior leaders

recognise that the current progress needs to continue and be sustained. Senior leaders' oversight of performance is much improved since the previous inspection. They know more work is needed on the quality assurance of frontline practice in the front door, including completion of single and multi-agency audit activity, to help inform them of the quality of practice for children.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. Because this is the first monitoring visit to your local authority, we will not publish this letter on the Ofsted website. You may share this letter with others if you wish.

Yours sincerely

Julie Knight
His Majesty's Inspector