

12 January 2024

Catherine Underwood
Corporate Director of People
Nottingham City Council
Loxley House
Station Street
Nottingham
NG2 3NG

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 22 and 23 November 2023. This was the third monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in July 2022. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Margaret Burke, Andy Waugh and Sophie Wales.

Areas covered by the visit

This visit evaluated the support to care leavers aged 18 to 25. Inspectors focused on:

- Quality and suitability of accommodation.
- Employment, education and training.
- Care leavers with specific needs (for example, unaccompanied asylum seekers, young parents or those who have had contact with the criminal justice system).

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

Headline findings

Senior leaders in children's services have built on the progress seen at the previous monitoring visits. They have achieved this despite the considerable pressures on the leadership within the context of complex wider financial and governance challenges for the council. They have remained resolute in their improvement journey and have continued to make step changes and service modifications, which are improving the quality and impact of practice for vulnerable children and young people and their families in Nottingham City Council. There have been further financial investments in children's services, which have been necessary to ensure adequate staffing and manageable caseloads. However, many of these additional resources are temporarily

funded and, without the continuity of these resources, the current pace of change and service developments is unlikely to be sustained.

In the last few months, Nottingham City's care-leaving services have benefited from increased attention and direction for improvement. Leaders have invited external scrutiny and worked alongside staff and care leavers to refocus the service. The recent addition to the leadership of the service of an interim service manager, and the narrowing span of the head of service, have enabled leaders to have a clearer understanding of what is required to strengthen the delivery of support to care leavers and to address the shortfalls identified in the last inspection.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Most care leavers in receipt of services are well supported by personal advisers (PAs). PAs build strong positive relationships with the young people they support. They act as good parents, providing consistent practical and emotional support. PAs demonstrate tenacity in maintaining contact with care leavers to ensure that they are safe and well, even working well with those care leavers who benefit from, but do not readily engage with, support. Care leavers are mostly positive about the support they receive from their PAs, with some reporting how difficult they have found it when PAs have changed.

Care leavers' health needs are prioritised and met through various health services. PAs demonstrate a strong understanding of young people's emotional well-being, and young people have the additional support of two mental health well-being practitioners co-located with the service. Where required, PAs liaise effectively with specialist workers both within and external to the service, including adult services, to draw in the support needed. Information about care leavers' health histories is routinely offered to young people but not always taken up by them.

The local offer has very recently been updated. It provides a comprehensive guide of what is available to care leavers and now clearly outlines the council's offer and responsibilities to care leavers aged 21-25 years old. Despite the reported efforts to ensure that care leavers understand their rights and entitlements, some young people, and their PAs, are not fully aware of the range of services that are available. Care leavers did not know where to find information on the local offer for care leavers. Leaders took immediate steps during the inspection visit to ensure that the local offer is now linked to the corporate council website, and a local offer app is planned to be launched in the coming months.

There has been focused attention on improving the quality, purposefulness and timeliness of pathway plans. Some progress has been made in the timeliness of these plans and most plans seek to identify needs. However, these plans are not consistently updated when young people's circumstances change, nor do they routinely capture young people's aspirations and ambitions for their future. Actions listed are often vague statements, which are mainly directed at the young person for

them to follow through. Where professionals are responsible for actions, these actions are frequently attributed to a role rather than a named person and are not broken down into SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant or timebound) tangible outcomes to check if progress is made or to hold others to account. Despite seeking care leavers' views, copies of pathway plans are not consistently shared with young people, and care leavers report that they do not see the purposefulness of them.

Very strong support is offered to the most vulnerable care leavers, and this is a strength. This support is also offered to care leavers over the age of 21 years. Disabled young people who qualify for adult care support have timely and well-planned transitions. PAs continue to support these young people to ensure that all wider aspects of their needs and entitlements are followed up. PAs demonstrate an understanding of the possible traumas and challenges former unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people may face and they provide suitable emotional and practical support. PAs offer sensitive support to young people who are care leavers and parents to support them in engaging with wider universal services for their children, alongside ensuring that their own needs are addressed. PAs support care leavers and ensure that their views are heard when their children are receiving services from children's social care. Care leavers in custody are visited regularly or spoken to via video link. When issues arise, PAs are proactive in alerting other professionals within the network to address concerns and prevent escalation. Young people are encouraged to engage in education or work in preparation for their release. Planning for young people's release from custody is considered early and there is a strong emphasis on liaising with probation and housing providers to prepare for when young people return to the community.

Leaders have been instrumental in ensuring that care leavers are well supported to access employment, education or training. A significant proportion of care leavers are supported in higher education. There is a clear focus on engaging care leavers who need more help to move into employment, education or training. Care leavers benefit from additional support provided by perceptive specialist practitioners, who engage with them to source routes into training or employment at their level of need.

The local authority has developed effective working arrangements with their own council housing provider and private providers. There is a range of accommodation available for young people that meets their needs and includes appropriate support for young people who are not yet ready to live independently. PAs and the specialist housing PA are proactive, increasing visiting to try and ensure that risks are minimised to prevent young people from becoming homeless. Managers have recently strengthened their oversight of young people's housing needs, including those young people who are bidding for accommodation or who are at risk of homelessness, to track and provide support where required.

A small number of former relevant care leavers who have returned to family members before leaving care at 18 years of age have not been offered the appropriate level of care-leaving support. Some of these young people have been

inaccurately considered as qualifying care leavers, which limits their access to support. Qualifying young people are not routinely made aware of their entitlements, which means that some who may require a service may not know they can ask for support when needed. Support to care leavers aged over 21 years is evident and some continue to receive appropriate support beyond the age of 21 years. However, formalised keep-in-touch arrangements with all care leavers over the age of 21 years are yet to be implemented.

Despite the challenges and the wider financial pressures on the council, senior leaders in children's services have recently focused their efforts on improving the quality of their services to care leavers. Some of these changes are beginning to have an impact. Increases in workforce have begun to ease some of the pressures of high workloads, although some workloads remain too high. While pressures remain, the current changes and additions are beginning to impact positively on the team culture and the quality of practice.

Changes made to the corporate parenting board, while very recent, demonstrate a clearer focus on the needs of children in care and care leavers and the council's commitment to its pledge and vision for children and young people. Leaders place a strong emphasis on participation, aspirations for young people and working in partnership to deliver improved outcomes for children and young people. The board appreciates that there is still much more work to do in this arena. Care leavers who spoke to inspectors were positive about the work of this board and how it has been instrumental in raising the status of care leavers in the council.

Managers and PAs use a dashboard to help them to track timeliness of key targets. There remains further development work to ensure that tracking includes the new practice standards expectation and targets for care leavers over the age of 21 years. Work has been carried out and a new dashboard is soon to be implemented.

Quality assurance and auditing processes are continually being strengthened. The audit tool is strength based and actions generally strike a fair balance between practice and compliance. Learning is collated and disseminated via learning bulletins and monthly reports, to promote the translation of learning into practice improvements.

PAs do not receive regular supervision. They state they do receive management oversight and case direction, but this is not recorded on care leavers' case records. Supervision records lack detail, reflection and analysis. Actions are not consistently identified for workers to complete to progress plans for young people, leaving some risks and needs not being overseen or managed for some care leavers and the PAs who support them. Managers have correctly identified these weaknesses in supervision and have recently introduced a new Supervision Policy and Practice Guidance. This document shows suitable ambition and sets clear practice expectations. The increases in management roles are enabling better oversight of PAs' effectiveness and workload pressures. It is too early to see these improvements

evidenced in practice, but the guidance and increases in management roles signal an important change in management culture.

Most PAs are positive about working for Nottingham. They feel supported by managers and their access to a useful range of training and development tools and opportunities, which are also made available to agency workers. Leaders are invested in revising the culture of service delivery. Practice thinking tools have been extended, as have practice standards, which have been co-created with PAs to aid understanding of expectations of them and ensure consistency of practice. Most workers feel included and involved in the change process, view these changes as positive and are signed up to them. However, these standards are new and are not yet fully delivered or evident in practice seen.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Margaret Burke
His Majesty's Inspector