

2 September 2024

Ailsa Barr  
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Dear Ailsa

### **Monitoring visit to Nottingham City children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Nottingham City children's services on 31 July and 1 August 2024. This was the fifth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in July 2022. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Margaret Burke and Rodica Cobarzan.

### **Areas covered by the visit**

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the 'front door' service that receives contacts and referrals, where decisions are made about:

- child protection enquiries – such as strategy discussions or section 47 enquiries
- emergency action – liaison with police to use powers of protection or applications for an emergency protection order
- child in need assessments
- decisions to accommodate
- step-up from and step-down to early help
- no further action/signposting.

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

### **Headline findings**

Elected members and senior leaders in Nottingham City Council remain committed to improving children's services despite ongoing financial challenges and changes in the senior leadership team. Transitions have been well managed and interim leadership arrangements provide consistency and ensure that improvement plans continue to be

progressed at pace. The separation of adults and children's services has enabled greater energy to be focused on developing services for children.

Senior leaders have a good oversight of children's services and are aware of the strengths and areas for development. They have strengthened many of the areas highlighted on previous inspection visits relating to front door services for children. The multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) processes and partnerships have matured and are now increasingly more responsive to requests from families and professional agencies for support. Management oversight of practice in the MASH and duty services now provides more appropriate steer and direction. The workforce in these services has started to stabilise, resulting in greater consistency in the quality of social work practice and work with families. Leaders recognise that working with partners to optimise its early help services is a fundamental area for development. Work is under way to create a system-wide partnership approach, to coordinate and streamline how early help services interface with statutory services.

### **Findings and evaluation of progress**

The MASH responds appropriately to most requests for support. The quality of information from partner agencies is improving but there remains some variability in the clarity and the timeliness of information sent when requesting support for children. Threshold decision-making in the MASH is mostly appropriate to enable children and families to receive support consistent with their level of need. Urgent requests for support that require immediate interventions are quickly responded to and progressed through to the duty team to coordinate a swift response.

Parental consent is appropriately requested in the MASH and throughout the service. When concerns are high and risk imminent, consent is appropriately considered and overruled if required. When risk of harm is not imminent, attempts are not routinely made to encourage parents to engage with services to ensure that children get the support they need. At times, the lack of consent is too readily accepted by practitioners without them being assured that children will receive support.

Referrals which require further assessment of children's needs are passed in a timely manner from the MASH to the receiving social work team to determine actions to meet the needs of children and families.

The progression of children's cases from the MASH and the duty and the fieldwork services to access early help services, however, is inconsistent. When social workers identify needs that could be best met by early help services, families do not benefit from an early help response that is organised and coordinated with a team around the family approach. This means that despite the range of early help services available there are often delays for children accessing appropriate support. Ongoing support often involves services working specifically to one element of the family's needs rather than a coordinated multi-agency holistic response. Step-down meetings from social work teams to early help occur for a small number of children, but for

many children step-down transitions and referrals to early help are not well supported. Families are simply provided with signposting information, which for some children is not followed through to ensure ongoing support materialises. Leaders recognise they still have more to do to ensure families benefit from effective early help support before their needs escalate and require a statutory response. They are actively responding to these challenges.

Some children are the subject of repeated requests for support through contacts, referrals and assessments. This is often a result of support and intervention being closed too early before children and families have all their identified needs assessed or addressed, or due to missed opportunities for effective transition to early help or other professional support services. For some repeat referrals, including those which have recently been closed and are re-referred directly to the duty and fieldwork teams, the new information is not carefully evaluated in the context of the child's history. The new request for help is often closed without any further intervention or assessment.

The response to children out of hours by emergency duty social workers is appropriate. The recent investment in this service has strengthened the management structure, oversight and support to workers, which has resulted in improvements to the effectiveness of this service. The members of the team are all suitably experienced and the vast majority are permanent employees. There has been work undertaken with the team which is driving a positive change in culture and practice in the team. Out-of-hours contacts are promptly passed on and responded to by day social work services.

Multi-agency strategy meetings take place when required. Effective information-sharing informs the analysis of risk and the decisions taken to conduct further investigations to help keep children safe. Child protection enquiries are appropriately conducted when necessary, including out of hours. They take place in a timely manner and include relevant information from professionals who work with the family. Effective information-sharing informs the analysis of risk and decisions concerning plans to keep children safe. Decisions to progress to the multi-agency coordination of an initial child protection conference are timely and proportionate to the level of risk.

The response to the police's use of powers of protection to keep children safe is appropriate. Joint working and the prompt follow-through of actions enables children to move from situations of harm to safety. When required, appropriate legal safeguards are obtained to support children to remain safely with carers who meet their needs.

Most children have an assessment of their needs completed within a reasonable timescale proportionate to the level of risk. Most assessments include a succinct analysis of the child's history and previous interventions to help inform decision-making for children. Information from partner agencies and children and family's

views are considered to provide a wider understanding of children's needs. Through these assessments, social workers demonstrate an understanding of children's experiences of parental mental ill health, neglect and their exposure to risks and vulnerabilities that result from these. As a result, children's needs are recognised and identified for support. Many assessments are sensitively written and are conducive to establishing positive working relationships with parents and children. Initial visits by workers to see children are not always completed in a timely way, leading to some delays in a start of the assessment of children's needs.

Child protection and most child in need plans are proportionate to children's needs as identified in the assessment and have realistic expectations of parents. For a small number of children, plans do not sufficiently articulate, identify or coordinate effective support for parents.

Decisions for children to come into care are appropriate and reflect the level of risk to children requiring immediate intervention to keep them safe. All placement decisions have effective senior management oversight.

Quality assurance processes in children's services have been strengthened, and a refreshed audit framework is now more firmly embedded in practice. Leaders have commissioned peer reviews to further challenge themselves on the quality of practice, and on ensuring their focus remains on things positively influencing outcomes for children. The improvement agenda includes monitoring through the Executive Children's Improvement and partnership boards. An independent chair provides both support and constructive challenge on the progress of the work in delivering improvements in children's services. All areas identified for improvement by inspectors on this visit were known and understood by leaders, with developments already under way to strengthen them. This includes strengthening partnership working, early help and front door services. However, the pace of change and progression to achieve the desired impacts for children in some of these areas has been protracted.

Leaders have refreshed and relaunched the Nottingham City learning academy. A broad range of training is available for staff at all levels, is easily accessible and feedback from staff about the learning offer is positive. Practitioners on the assessed and supported year in employment (ASYE) value the support they are offered. Some experienced practitioners in the MASH and duty service have, however, struggled to benefit from the training offer due to competing priorities.

The council has been successful in its recruitment to many posts across all social work teams. Social work career progression pathways have been consolidated, experienced practitioner roles created and ASYE numbers have increased. While caseload numbers in the duty service are reducing, there are still some social workers in the service with high workloads. Workers and managers attempt to juggle and balance continuing workload pressures. At times, this has impacted on a small number of children, affecting the quality and timeliness of work with them.

Workers report that they enjoy working for Nottingham City Council. Many have been employed by the city for several years; some have returned to the council as they appreciate the culture and working environment. All workers are positive about the support from their line managers, their visibility and availability to support them. Workers also describe senior managers as approachable. Practitioners reported that supervision takes place regularly to provide direction, support and steer. Inspectors could see evidence that the quality of this oversight is steadily improving.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Margaret Burke  
**His Majesty's Inspector**