

12 December 2024

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Dear Jill

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

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Nottingham City children's services on 12 and 13 November 2024. This was the sixth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in July 2022. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Margaret Burke and Rachel Griffiths.

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

Inspectors revisited the areas covered in the monitoring visit carried out in April 2024 and reviewed the progress made in support to children in care planning and achieving permanence since the last inspection. Inspectors focused on:

- The quality of children's assessments, plans and reviews.
- The quality of visits and work with children.
- Where children in care live and the support they and their carers receive.
- The quality of management oversight and supervision.
- Stability and sustainability of the children in care service workforce, including the impact of current caseloads on practice.
- Performance and quality assurance oversight of senior leaders.

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

### **Headline findings**

Since the last inspection visit, Nottingham City Council has continued to make strides in its children's services improvement journey. Progress has been sustained against the backdrop of severe financial pressures, changes in leadership and continuous external scrutiny of the council. Children's services now have a new permanent

director of children's services (DCS), with leadership no longer spread across children's and adult services. The capacity of the senior management team has been increased and all the senior leadership and team management posts within the children in care service are now permanently filled. The process of appointing new leaders has inevitably impacted the pace of change. While the progress made to support children in care planning and achieving permanence in some areas has been slow, it is evident that plans which have previously stalled are now accelerating.

## **Findings and evaluation of progress**

Children enter care when it is in their best interest and all other options to ensure their safety and care have been considered. Many children remain with their parents or family members on interim care orders while assessments are completed. For some children, the court's decisions have been impacted by the lack of suitable foster placements available to meet children's needs.

A significant proportion of children who have entered care in the last six months have previously been in care. A consistent theme for these children is that the earlier assessments have concentrated on the parents' needs and ability to provide safe care without sufficient attention paid to understanding children's experiences and the impact on them of living within such households. Most of these children have re-entered care following a crisis incident. The emotional distress and anxieties are compounded for many of these children as they are further traumatised by a move to carers who are very often different from their first set of carers.

The quality and impact of assessments for children in care remains too variable. Some provide a fair overview of children's needs, but others are based on too limited interactions with the child to understand their individual needs or the impact of their earlier life experiences. For many assessments, large sections of information are cut and pasted from previous documents. Assessments for children in care are not routinely updated. Leaders have focused the workforce on improving the quality of assessments and plans and management oversight of casework to ensure the quality of information in these documents makes them purposeful for children and they support the plans for them.

Child in care reviews take place within statutory timescales and they are attended by the relevant people involved in the child's life. Minutes and recommendations of the reviews are not routinely uploaded onto the child's case file in a timely way to help the social worker in the updating of care plans. Reviews are not routinely held following a change in the care plan or placement change. As a result, children in these situations are not always best supported with an up-to-date and relevant care plan with actions which make it clear who will support the child moving forward.

There is increasing evidence of independent reviewing officers (IROs) tracking actions to ensure that children's plans are progressed. Some IROs regularly review children's plans, seeking updates from social workers, conducting visits to children

and providing additional management oversight of case records. However, not all IROs are diligent in providing this scrutiny on case records or in visiting children.

Permanence planning for children with a plan for adoption is effective. Younger children are usually matched with adopters promptly and at the right time for them. Persistent efforts are made to successfully identify adopters for older children and those with additional/complex needs. Skilful direct work with children with adoption plans has helped to ease their transition into their adoptive placement. Children with a plan for adoption also benefit from impressive life-story work to help them to understand their early life experiences and journey to permanence.

When children have permanency plans that are other than adoption, these are not as effectively progressed. Too many young children live in children's homes, and while this may be appropriate for some, for others, this is due to the lack of suitable foster homes. The management rationale for placing children in such placements is not evident in records. For some of these young children their plan for permanence is ambiguous; they often have dual permanence plans of long-term residential care and long-term foster care. These plans are not always based on an up-to-date assessment or thorough consideration of all possible options.

Most children in long-term foster care are thriving, having been living in the same, stable placement for many years. For these children, they have the certainty of being matched to their carers who are providing them with high standards of care and support. However, too many children in foster care still experience delay in professionals progressing permanence decisions. For some children, this is simply a delay in formally ratifying and notifying them of the decision to remain with their carers, leaving children without the assurance that they can remain with their foster carers.

Children in care assessments and plans do not focus enough on progressing permanency in a timely way. IROs are not consistently prompting timely permanency planning for all children in care. Case supervision discussions do not drive children's permanence plans effectively. Leaders have recently strengthened management oversight and the tracking of permanency planning where the plan is not one of adoption, but it is too soon to see the impact of this.

Most social workers visit children regularly and in line with their needs, and for those children who have had a consistent social worker, they build positive relationships with them. However, despite the increasing stability in the workforce, some children are still experiencing too many changes of worker. During visits, social workers see children alone and check that their carers provide suitable care, and that the home provides safe and appropriate space for them. Direct work is evident in the work with some children, conducted by both social workers and family support workers, but this is not consistently undertaken for all children. Some children benefit from support provided by the children in care child and adolescent mental health service in-house specialist support team. This team provides effective interventions which help children to understand their life experiences. Leaders have raised expectations

for the completion of direct work and life-story work for those children who are not placed for adoption. They recognise that there is more to do to ensure that all children receive support in a timely way to help them make sense of their early and ongoing life experiences.

Children's family time is encouraged and supported. Efforts are made to ensure that children maintain contact with family members and that these visits take place in a safe way. Children are also supported to understand pressures in family relationships and family time sessions are supervised where required.

Children in care have the opportunity to participate in a range of sporting and other activities that enrich their experiences. Hobbies are promoted, and children are encouraged by their carers and professionals to achieve and develop emotionally, socially and educationally. The social workers and the children who spoke to inspectors report that children are well supported by their schools, with additional support brokered by the virtual school.

A small number of children remain in care for longer than necessary. Some foster carers with children placed with them long-term are often unwilling to consider a special guardianship order (SGO) due to concerns about the level of support they will receive. Leaders are aware that there is a need to communicate a consistent offer of support more clearly to carers in these situations. They are actively working on producing guidance that will make it clear what support is available to both SGO and kinship carers.

For children in care who are on full care orders but are now living safely with their parents, the progress in securing the discharge of the care order is often slow and delayed. Placement with parent reports are not routinely completed or updated within required timescales. Oversight at team manager and IRO level has not secured the progression of this work. Very recent senior management oversight of this group of children has resulted in more concrete plans to secure legal agreement to end some of these care arrangements, but for some children even with these new timescales they still remain in care much longer than necessary.

Sufficiency challenges have resulted in Nottingham City's continued use of unregistered children's homes. Leaders have strengthened systems to oversee the safety and welfare of these children, and children are visited regularly by social workers and their IROs. A weekly panel, chaired by the service director, reviews the safety and planning for these children.

Comprehensive quality assurance systems and a well-developed auditing framework provide leaders and practitioners with a clear picture of the quality of practice. Learning from quality assurance activity is embedded, closing the loop to make effective improvements. The amount of good work seen is increasing but leaders know that they are still appropriately judging the majority of practice as requiring improvement. Leaders also recognise that there is still more to do to ensure that audits are achieving the balance between compliance and quality, and to ensure that

the auditing process consistently results in improving children's individual experiences.

The workforce in the children in care and fieldwork services continues to stabilise, and children are now experiencing fewer changes in social workers. Social workers' caseloads continue to reduce, allowing workers time to embed improved practice standards and expectations. Workers are positive about working in Nottingham. They report the benefits of having more stable teams and say that they are feeling well supported by managers at every level. The new children in care head of service is having a positive impact on the changing culture and in the optimism in the trajectory in the journey of change. Some workers have returned to work for Nottingham City after hearing about the changes in the service.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Margaret Burke  
**His Majesty's Inspector**