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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 the 25 and 26 July 2023. This was the second 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

This visit reviewed progress made in support for children in need, including those subject to a protection plan and disabled children. Inspectors reviewed:

- The quality of children's assessments plans and reviews.
- The quality of visits and work with children.
- The quality of management oversight and supervision.
- Stability and sustainability of the safeguarding 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 previous monitoring visit, a committed and stable leadership team has continued to progress the 'Changing Lives, Changing Futures' improvement programme for children's services. Senior leaders have an accurate and realistic understanding of the quality of frontline practice, which is supported by a revised quality assurance and performance framework. There are early signs of tangible improvements in field work practice and the environment in which staff work. A reduction in caseloads has been supported by investment in additional agency social

workers. However, this is a temporary arrangement and senior leaders know that improvements need to be sustainable. There continues to be inconsistency in the quality of practice for children in need and those subject to a child protection plan, compounded by challenges in achieving greater workforce stability.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Some children with a child in need or protection plan have the opportunity to develop strong and meaningful relationships with their social workers. This helps children to feel confident in sharing their views and wishes so that workers understand what their daily life is like. This knowledge enables workers to assess and analyse children's needs and identify risks to inform planning. Disabled children's social workers in the whole life disability service have a sound understanding of the needs of children and the impact of children's disabilities on them and their family's day-to-day lives.

Some children have too many changes in social worker. When a change in social worker happens, necessary work to progress children's plans is delayed. As a result, some children and families find it difficult to begin a trusting relationship with a newly allocated social worker and for a small number of children it means risks can increase. Senior leaders know this and have an ambitious workforce offer and delivery plan that is leading to some stability in staffing. However, this continues to be an area of significant challenge, and the sustainability of a stable workforce is an area of priority for children's services.

Children are visited regularly by social workers, and when children need extra support, this can be more often than is specified in their plan. Visits to children are often supported by children and family practitioners, co-working with social workers, when involved with larger family groups. Children appropriately have the opportunity to see workers alone or at school. Children's records reflect some children's views and wishes well, and some are sufficiently detailed about the purpose of visits. This is an area of gradual progress, but the quality of recording is not consistent in all children's records. Some children's records provide limited information about children's views, and there can be a lack of information about children's presentation and their home environment.

Some children and families do not receive support quickly enough, due to waiting lists for services which support families experiencing domestic abuse or mental health difficulties. This can also lead to delays in children's plans progressing. Social workers try to be creative and find alternative support for children and their families. While many disabled children receive appropriate intervention and help, there are often long waiting lists for some short breaks services and there are challenges in finding direct payment and outreach workers.

Recent child and family assessments in the whole life disability service appropriately include children's and parents' views. Disabled children's social workers are skilled in

seeking children's views when children use alternative methods of communication. Assessments include a clear analysis of children's family history, their needs and current risks, which helps to inform decision-making at child protection review conferences for children with a child protection plan. Disabled children with child-in-need plans do not always benefit from having an up-to-date assessment of their needs. This reduces the quality of information in their child-in-need plan, so progress is not easy to monitor.

When assessments identify reduced risks to children on a child protection plan, social workers provide a recommendation to step down support to a child-in-need plan, and this receives appropriate oversight from the team manager. Child protection coordinators make appropriate efforts to ensure that parents and carers receive social work reports in time before meetings are held. Audit activity has identified that parents and carers do not always receive reports in good time, and this is something that senior leaders are sighted on as part of service improvements. Interpreters are appropriately used in review meetings to ensure that families can be fully engaged and understand the child protection process.

The majority of review meetings for children in need are held regularly and at a frequency which meets the needs of children and their families. Most child in need meetings are attended by the right professionals, who share up-to-date information about children's needs, or, if they cannot attend, they submit a report to update on progress. Child-in-need meetings do not always review the actions from the original plan, which makes it difficult to evaluate what difference intervention and support are making for children.

Most child protection core group meetings are held regularly and are attended by relevant partner agencies. Some children, about whom there are concerns of neglect, do not always have a health representative attending. This reduces the effectiveness of meetings and does not ensure that all risks are shared and known or that the family and professionals are fully updated about all of children's needs.

Children's plans do not always identify individual children's needs and refer generically to all the children in the family. The quality of plans is not consistent across the service and not all urgent actions have specific timescales or are prioritised so that families and professionals are really clear about what needs to change and when. Some plans are specific and clearly show what progress is being made to improve children's circumstances.

Senior leaders have strengthened the quality assurance and performance framework, and this is beginning to be embedded across the service. Audits identify the right areas for improvement and development, which helps focus senior leaders' work to strengthen practice and learning. Stability of the workforce and the quality of supervision and management oversight are high on senior leaders' agenda and are appropriate priorities as part of the transformation programme.

Senior leaders have focused on ensuring that social workers have the right tools to help them do their job well. Social workers are consistently positive about the direct work toolkit bags which they have all been provided with to help support their direct work with children. Children are beginning to benefit from the improvement in the quality of direct work completed with them. There has been a recent re-launch and revision of a neglect toolkit. This is very early in its implementation, so it is too soon to see its impact. However, staff are aware of this, and children's records demonstrate that it is beginning to be used in practice.

Senior leaders have taken appropriate action to reduce the caseloads of social workers and child protection coordinators so that children have the best opportunity to build a relationship with workers involved with them. This has been supported by investment in the additional resource of additional temporary agency social workers. Senior leaders have an appropriate focus on the wider areas of transformation across the service and across the partnership. They acknowledge that improvements need to be sustainable in the longer term.

Supervision for social workers is mostly taking place regularly, and the format of the supervision tool, when used well, is making the supervision process a reflective and focused discussion with a clear sense of risks and needs for the child. This includes a review of previous supervision actions that have been agreed. However, not all managers use the tool effectively. Some actions are not always followed through, and in some supervision records, there is no evidence of appropriate challenge or questioning by the manager to help progress children's plans. Senior management oversight of children on plans for a long period of time is not always visible in children's records.

Social workers are positive about working for Nottingham City and about the support they receive from line managers, who they describe as accessible, approachable and calm. Staff can access a comprehensive range of training opportunities, which is also available to agency social workers, and this appreciated and valued.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Julie Knight
His Majesty's Inspector