

Nottingham City Council

Inspection of children’s social care services

Inspection dates: 5 November 2018 to 16 November 2018

**Lead inspector: Caroline Walsh
Her Majesty’s Inspector**

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Requires improvement to be good
Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement to be good

Since the last full inspection in 2014, a range of services have improved for children. There are areas of good practice across the service, but also important areas where improvements are required to ensure that all children get the right support at the right time.

Effective strategic partnerships with substantial investment in early intervention and edge-of-care services support children to remain with their families. Leaders convey a clear vision for services that staff understand and believe in.

The council ensures that initial responses to concerns about children are well managed. Engagement and direct work by social workers with children and families are a strength and help produce high-quality assessments. Strategic oversight and multi-agency work with vulnerable children and young people who present as being at risk of exploitation are effective at reducing harm. Most children in care live in stable homes that meet their needs.

Areas for improvement are not always understood by leaders or addressed with sufficient urgency. Planning for children and the pace of change to improve children's lives are not strong enough to achieve good outcomes for all children. Some children live for too long in homes where they are neglected. A small group of very young children have been left vulnerable in unsuitable private fostering arrangements.

There are not enough social workers to deliver high-quality interventions, given the complexity of need in the city. The systems in place are not good enough to ensure that all children in care are supported to achieve good education outcomes or timely permanence. Leaders have not explored why there are delays in achieving timely adoption for children, and, although children are helped to remain together with their brothers and sisters, the matching processes take too long.

Improved support for care leavers is the result of leaders' focused attention, but insufficient priority has been given to securing adequate emergency accommodation for vulnerable young people. Consequently, children are being held overnight in police cells.

What needs to improve

- Management oversight of the use of private fostering.
- The quality of planning for children and their review across all service areas.
- The recognition of and timely action for children living with sustained neglect.
- The quality of management oversight and supervision of social workers to progress children's plans.
- The quality of return home interviews for children who go missing.
- The educational progress and achievement for children in care.
- The availability of sufficient and suitable emergency accommodation for vulnerable young people and children with complex needs.
- The progress and timeliness of permanence plans for children, including fostering for adoption.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection requires improvement to be good.

1. Although the council has continued to develop its responses to initial enquiries and concerns about children, and there is some very good practice in supporting children in early help, there remain weaknesses in the social work provided to children and families. This can delay progress in improving children's circumstances.
2. A wide array of early help and family support services effectively improve children's circumstances in Nottingham city. These important resources include open access to children's centres, and to play and youth sessions, helping staff to identify need early and offer positive activities for children throughout the city. In the last year, parenting groups have been strengthened to support more families. Early help assessments are high quality. Close working arrangements between the right agencies, including social workers where necessary, ensure positive outcomes for most children.
3. Services at the front door are responsive to children's needs. Concerns about children's welfare are identified by a range of agencies, and this demonstrates their understanding of the thresholds for intervention. The integrated front door acts as a single point of access for all enquiries about children, including concerns about children's emotional health and well-being. Children with emotional health difficulties have access to timely assessments and a range of therapies to improve their well-being. Families benefit from support while they are waiting for the provision of services.
4. Children receive the right services because timely and effective processes within the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) ensure that information is promptly shared, which leads to appropriate decision-making. Strong partnership arrangements and co-location of staff result in well-managed domestic abuse concerns, with risk quickly identified. Partners helpfully inform children's schools of instances when children are present at domestic abuse incidents attended by the police. This enables additional support to be provided to these children.
5. Child protection enquiries are swift and well-coordinated, including when concerns are received out of hours. Co-location of police, health and probation agencies with children's social care supports timely strategy discussions and appropriate decision-making. Children at risk of significant harm are urgently seen and risk is quickly assessed. A small minority of enquiries take too long. This leaves some families with prolonged uncertainty.
6. Social workers' timely assessments of children's needs are thorough and provide a clear view of risks to children. They are informed by good-quality direct work, which means that children are contributing to and influencing

their own plans. The council is aware that chronologies are an area for development and could be better used to inform assessments.

7. Both children in need and child protection plans are weak. Inconsistent social work practice means that interventions are not always successful at producing the changes needed to improve outcomes for children. Written plans are not specific enough, nor are they clear about timescales for professionals and families to measure progress. At times, there is insufficient urgency to complete tasks. Heavy workloads and complex work lead to a lack of prioritisation by social workers and managers on producing the minutes of meetings and ensuring that plans are updated. This shortfall contributes to an element of drift in child protection planning.
8. Children's reviews are well attended by partner agencies, but their effectiveness is hampered by a lack of clear focus on measurable targets for many children. Weaker plans leave families unclear about the actions they need to undertake to improve their children's lives, and this makes the tracking of progress more difficult. As a result, some children experiencing neglect also experience delay when the harm is not addressed in a timely manner. In these cases, chronic and longstanding concerns continue for too long, with little sustained improvement. Managers and chairs of child protection conferences do not always raise these issues with senior leaders to ensure that they are prioritised and resolved. Sometimes the principal risks for children are masked by the high use of multiple child protection categories.
9. Management oversight and the supervision of social workers are not consistently identifying the right areas for improvement. There is insufficient focus on the shortfalls in practice in some essential areas of social work.
10. When risks for children significantly increase, the public law outline is used appropriately to support families to address concerns. Legal planning meetings properly agree thresholds and actions, but letters to families are poorly written and do not clearly explain the concerns or describe the support that will be offered. A lack of effective management oversight means that any drift in progress is not well identified. This creates delay in reducing risk and helping children achieve certainty and permanence when they cannot live with their families.
11. The use of private fostering arrangements is not well understood nor subject to sufficient management oversight. Such arrangements have been used inappropriately for young babies, creating instability and uncertainty for them. The council took immediate action to secure the parenting needs of these children during the inspection.
12. Concerns and allegations about risk of harm to children, posed by professionals and volunteers, are well managed. Actions are progressed in

good time and the information is used to inform future practice and reduce harm.

13. Vulnerable children living with high risks, including risks of criminal or sexual exploitation, or drugs trafficking, are well identified and rapidly supported. Risks presented by forced marriage, violence within communities and female genital mutilation are generally understood and supported, although action taken to reduce risk is not always swift enough, leaving children potentially vulnerable to harm. Good engagement from partner organisations in strategy meetings ensures that there is strong safety planning. Appropriate interventions are made to reduce risk for children. However, return home interviews for children who go missing continue to be an area for improvement. These are not consistently of good quality and some do not provide enough detail about what triggers children to go missing, and this reduces their effectiveness.
14. Children benefit from well-monitored alternative learning provision. The council challenges and supports schools appropriately, and this is helping to reduce the frequency with which children are excluded from Nottingham city schools.
15. A lack of suitable short-term emergency accommodation means that too many children are inappropriately kept in police cells overnight. Insufficient escalation of this problem to senior managers by frontline staff has masked its severity.
16. When 16- and 17-year-olds present as homeless, they are quickly screened by social workers in the duty service. However, some assessments are not carried out with sufficient urgency, and do not thoroughly consider wider support needs. This leaves a few young people at risk of harm.
17. A newly created whole-life disability service supports children and families well. Consultation with children's social workers ensures that their safeguarding needs are met. A range of bespoke personalised services are available to enrich children's lives, and care transitions are well managed to ensure that young people are supported through to early adulthood.
18. A range of specialist edge-of-care services, including Multi-Systemic Therapy – Child Abuse and Neglect, and targeted family support, work effectively with the whole family to keep children at home with increased safety. This intensive support helps reduce risk for children. Most of the time, this prevents the escalation of concerns that can lead to children coming into care.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers requires improvement to be good.

19. Decisions for children to come into care are taken appropriately, although for some children who live in neglectful or risky situations, it can take too long, making it harder for them to settle and feel safe.
20. The number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children arriving in Nottingham is steadily growing and the children benefit from specialist support from the council. Firm plans are underway to work with the Home Office to strengthen workers' ability to secure the immigration status of these children at the earliest opportunity.
21. Social workers in the children in care teams have manageable workloads. This allows them to visit children regularly, understand their needs and help them to progress. Children confirmed to inspectors that they have positive relationships with social workers, who support them well. Children who live out of area receive the same level of service as children who live locally. Good engagement with children means that their contact and placement plans take into account their wishes and feelings and help them maintain good relationships with their families. High-quality life-story work is consistently delivered to these children.
22. Children in care generally live in homes that meet their individual needs, but some children with more complex needs experience too many moves before they achieve stability. Previous high turnover in social workers has left a legacy of inconsistent care planning and missed opportunities to secure permanence for some children. More recently, plans to increase the range of local foster carers are progressing well, providing more choice, although matching decisions for children are not well recorded.
23. Care plans for children are generally reviewed in a timely manner by independent reviewing officers, and children are well supported to engage in their care planning, which helps them to make sense of their care journey. Children's emotional and well-being needs receive appropriate priority and there has been progress made in addressing delays to initial health assessments. Social workers do not always ensure that children understand and embrace their identities in respect of their cultural heritage.
24. Most children in care are not achieving sufficiently well in their educational outcomes and many do not have a current personal education plan (PEP) or one of sufficient quality. This makes it difficult to assess whether children's educational needs are being met and it is therefore less obvious what should happen to ensure that they are achieving in line with their peers. Where good-quality PEPs are in evidence, children have clear educational goals, leading to plans that help them do well.

25. Social workers rightly consider a full range of permanence options for children, including return home plans where appropriate. Assessments are thorough and provide a clear rationale for recommendations. Despite this, permanence plans are not achieved promptly for all children. Children in long-term foster care can wait too long for permanence to be secured. Processes and systems developed to protect the child, such as panels and management sign off, are used sequentially and can become time-consuming, thus delaying the progress of plans, including special guardianship. This contributes to long periods of uncertainty for children.
26. Foster carers value both their supervising social workers, whom they find accessible and responsive, and the quality of training and support provided. Assessments of foster carers are of high quality. Comprehensive and timely reviews are confirmed by the fostering panel chair. Children's feedback is suitably represented in reviews of foster carers, providing important assurance about the quality of care. Foster carers are well supported to commit to children long-term, and several children are now being adopted by their carers. Appropriate support packages are provided to facilitate stability for children to live together with their brothers and sisters.
27. Social workers in the adoption and permanence teams explore a range of routes to find the right adoptive match for children, with some positive outcomes for children with more complex needs. The efforts of teams to keep children together, respecting important brother and sister relationships, are impressive. For most children, though, adoption takes too long. Matching processes are not timely, and sometimes there is a delay in commencing the search for a family. Supervision, children's review meetings and adoption tracking processes do not address the delay in matching children to their adoptive home. Insufficient parallel planning and sequential processes to agree funding for inter-agency placements build in delay and slow down adoption. Fostering for adoption is under-developed, resulting in missed opportunities to secure permanence at the earliest opportunity for young babies.
28. Good use is made of the adoption support fund to assist children with specific difficulties. A dedicated team provides support for children and their families by using specialist assessments and therapeutic interventions, although some children experience delay in receiving this support because the process is too sequential. There is an absence of clear plans for children receiving post-order support, and this makes it difficult to measure progress and ensure that effective support is being provided.
29. The quality of the leaving care service has improved since the last inspection. An increasingly experienced team of personal advisers provides dedicated support to care leavers and uses a range of creative efforts to keep in touch with those vulnerable young people who are harder to engage. A responsive duty service ensures that young people's well-being and wider needs are

swiftly addressed. This provides opportunities to develop more trusting relationships with care leavers, and, in turn, to engage them more fully and improve their circumstances.

30. Pathway plans for care leavers are not consistently of a good enough quality. Care leavers reflected that they are not useful documents and although an increasing proportion of new care leavers receive their important health information, too many have not had the benefit of this. Senior leaders had already identified that personal advisers are introduced too late to children in care, and they are in the early stages of planning a service redesign. The current situation does not help personal advisers to form good initial relationships with young people to support them through to independence.
31. Specialist workers in the leaving care team provide additional capacity and support to personal advisers in order to reduce risks for care leavers and better meet their needs. The transitions social worker ensures that young people with additional needs receive support into adulthood. Good use is made of the 'Shared Lives' scheme to provide extra help to vulnerable care leavers who stay with their former foster carers. This provides continuity of care and stability. The dedicated children in care police officer successfully supports restorative justice interventions, and there have been impressive reductions in offending rates over the last two years.
32. The number of care leavers engaged in employment, education or training has recently dipped from its previous high levels. This is partly because of the loss of a key member of staff who supported employability skills. Although this support has recently been replaced, there is insufficient urgency to ensure that a higher number of care leavers are engaged in purposeful activity.
33. The council does not have sufficient emergency accommodation to cope with demand. This means that too many care leavers wait in unsatisfactory and potentially unsafe circumstances, such as hotels, before they are found a suitable placement. The use of hotels has very recently reduced, with closer working relationships established with housing providers. However, more sustainable choice is required to meet the needs of very vulnerable young people.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families requires improvement to be good.

34. The council's self-assessment does not accurately identify all the shortfalls found during this inspection. Weaknesses in planning for children across all service areas have not been sufficiently addressed. The pace of improvement has not been maintained. As a result, variations in the quality of services mean some children experience too much delay before their needs are fully

met. Capacity issues, particularly in locality teams, are not prioritised and dealt with. The consequent drift this creates for some children, in improving their circumstances or achieving timely permanence, is not well recognised.

35. Senior managers continue to lead effective strategic partnerships, although these do not fully benefit all children who require social work services. The vision for integrated services is well articulated and the main partner agencies demonstrate commitment to this. The enhanced MASH and arrangements to meet children's emotional health and well-being are good examples of the maturity and success of these local partnerships. Investments in early intervention and edge-of-care services are effective at keeping children with their own families. The prioritisation of investment in early help is reducing demand for social work interventions. It enables the council to manage the high demand for support coming from its comparatively very deprived population.
36. The virtual school is not effective in addressing the needs of all children in care, and too many legacy issues have delayed progress in increasing the focus on educational attainment for children.
37. Despite placement sufficiency being a priority for the council, a lack of urgent attention to emergency accommodation means that there are too many occasions when children spend time in inappropriate temporary settings, such as police cells and bed and breakfast accommodation. Senior managers have not understood the impact of this on children and young people. A lack of effective early planning for children and young people, and too little corporate focus on addressing this risk, have left managers with little alternative but to agree these unsuitable arrangements.
38. The council's strategy to improve the quality of care for children by offering more local foster care is showing early signs of progress, and the support offered to foster carers is particularly strong. The vast majority of children live in stable homes that meet their needs. A strategic focus to achieve permanence for all children is now well supported. Many foster carers are receiving the right support to enable them to offer permanence, including adoption, which gives children continuity and certainty in their future.
39. Senior leaders continue to work closely with the Local Family Justice Board to address lengthy care proceedings. Good working relationships with the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service and the designated family judge are appropriately identifying the factors creating delay, but there is more to do to reduce the average length of care proceedings, which was 44 weeks at the time of the inspection.
40. Political support for children in care and care leavers from elected members who champion their needs helps to promote wider corporate responsibility. A draft local offer for care leavers, which coherently sets out their rights and

entitlements, has been co-produced with young people. Support is clear and council tax exemptions are agreed for care leavers. Children in care council members influence practice, but sometimes initiatives and decisions take too long to take effect. For example, leisure passes for children have only just been agreed.

41. Financial pressures in the council mean that its target to support 10% of care leavers in council employment is becoming more challenging. An employability programme helps care leavers with work-ready skills, but care leavers are not getting the right corporate support to access work opportunities, develop independence skills and make good transitions to adulthood.
42. The director of children's services leads strategic responses to the challenge of increasing knife crime and serious offending risks for children. This is successfully preventing criminal behaviour. Joint work with the police, youth justice service and community-based services results in shared strategic approaches to providing swift and flexibly deployed resources, reducing the risk of young people re-offending.
43. Senior managers use a range of learning opportunities and feedback mechanisms to inform service developments, including complaints, staff surveys and an app that provides opportunities for children to give direct feedback. This information influences priorities for the practice improvement days. A concerted emphasis on delivering core standards for social work is championed by senior managers and is beginning to reap rewards. Positive impact can be seen in the regular visiting of children, strong assessments and good mechanisms to gather children's views.
44. Management oversight and supervision are not effective in ensuring that all children's plans progress at an appropriate pace. An absence of effective tracking processes means that not all children benefit from consistently good practice to achieve change within their timescales.
45. Visible and highly respected leaders in children's services ensure a continued focus on interventions that are child-centred and responsive. Staff reflect this vision, placing children and families at the heart of their practice. They are enthusiastic advocates for Nottingham city. Morale is high and social workers feel valued. The 'grow our own' social work scheme continues to be successful and newly qualified social workers value and benefit from excellent support.
46. Nonetheless, workforce capacity continues to affect the consistency of support offered to children and families. The use of agency staff has reduced, and the turnover of social workers and managers has decreased. Yet, there continue to be service pressures felt across teams. The resilience of the

service to respond to times of peak demand and high absence is therefore constrained.

47. High caseloads for many staff, particularly in locality teams, and limited administrative support, adversely affect their work-life balance and their ability to complete their work to a consistently high quality. Regular supervision is not always offered due to capacity issues for both team managers and social workers, and this slows down improvements for children and young people.
48. The service has made important gains in developing a robust performance reporting function for its relatively new electronic recording system. However, limited narrative in performance management reporting means that senior managers do not always fully understand issues at the frontline. Audit activity provides important feedback about the quality of services for children, but the pace of change to address the areas for improvement is not always sufficient.



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Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.gov.uk/ofsted

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