

# Nottinghamshire County Council

## Inspection of local authority children's services

**Inspection dates: 7 October 2019 to 18 October 2019**

**Lead inspector: Margaret Burke, Her Majesty's Inspector**

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

At the last inspection in 2015, Nottinghamshire was judged to be good across all service areas, except for care leavers. Good practice has been maintained for children in care, and the care leavers service has been transformed. Most children who require help and protection services receive effective support, but the local authority has not successfully sustained good services for all children. While a focus on some large-scale service areas has resulted in improvement, other smaller defined areas of practice have not received the same attention. Progress in improving these discrete areas of practice has been limited.

Political and corporate support has remained a strength for children's services, with continued financial backing and increased commitment from district councils. Some notable achievements have been secured, such as increasing and stabilising the workforce. Strengthened performance management arrangements provide the local authority with sound information to help leaders better understand need and ensure that services are targeted to those who require help.

Most children, especially those in care or who are care leavers, receive a good service. Social workers know children and families well. Good-quality direct work ensures that children's views are heard and acted on. Early help support is effective, and children in need of urgent protection receive a swift and appropriate response.

Children in care make good progress in stable homes with skilled and committed carers, and care leavers' needs are well addressed. Staff morale is high and social workers receive effective supervision, training and support.

The local authority has accurately identified areas that require further improvement. Leaders recognise the need to develop multi-agency involvement in strategy meetings and that further work is required to meet the needs of privately fostered children. Steps have already been taken to increase the workforce in geographical areas where social work practice is weaker, but it will take time to ensure that improvements are made in quality and the consistency of practice. The local authority's assessment, support and oversight of a small number of children living in unregistered fostering placements with connected carers is not robust. These placements do not fully comply with regulations. Managers acknowledged the need to do more to ensure compliance, and during the inspection they took action to increase scrutiny and oversight of these arrangements.

Leaders have taken steps to accelerate plans, already in existence, to address the weaker areas of practice identified in this inspection and in previous inspection visits.

### **What needs to improve**

- The quality of strategy discussions and meetings so that they are always timely, involve all relevant partners and are well recorded.
- The consistency of social work practice in all geographical areas of the county.
- The awareness of, and social work response to, safeguarding privately fostered children.
- The assessments, support and oversight of children in care placed with family and friend carers.

### **The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: requires improvement to be good**

1. Early help services are effective and make a positive difference to children. Children and their families have access to support and interventions from a well-developed and extensive range of universal and targeted early help services. Children and families benefit from comprehensive early help assessments and corresponding action plans that appropriately identify interventions to support their needs. Children make good progress through services that help them to understand their emotions, build self-esteem and develop their confidence. When risks increase, children are appropriately referred to statutory services in order to receive additional help and support.

2. Children identified as being in need of urgent protection and considered to be at risk of significant harm receive a quick and effective response from the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). Thresholds are well understood by partners and within the MASH. Consent from families is appropriately sought or dispensed with. Daily multi-agency domestic abuse meetings identify any risks to children, and these are then responded to. The initial response to request for services, including requests made for services out of hours, is appropriate. However, some contacts that require further information gathering and triage by social workers are taking longer to process than the prescribed MASH timescales, resulting in delay in commencing work with some children. Leaders recognise the challenges in responding to non-urgent contacts and are currently reviewing MASH processes to ensure more timely and effective responses.
3. When safeguarding concerns for children are identified and the threshold for multi-agency decision-making is met, strategy discussions are not always held or considered. The rationale for not convening a strategy discussion is not clearly recorded in children's records. Strategy discussions that do take place do not include all relevant partner agencies to ensure that decisions are based on all available information to protect children. The last inspection and the focused visit earlier this year raised this as an area for improvement. The lack of progress to address this is a concern.
4. Once contacts become a referral and children have been identified as requiring children's social care intervention, effective management oversight ensures seamless transition on to the relevant service. Children are allocated social workers promptly in most receiving teams, and most children are seen in a timely way.
5. Most children who require ongoing help and protection get a good response, and the standard of support services is high. However, the quality of social work practice varies across the county. The lack of a consistently robust response in some parts of the local authority means that, for a small number of children, their circumstances do not improve in the same way or as quickly as they do for children in other areas. The local authority has started to address this with the introduction of additional staff, but it is too early to see the impact.
6. Although assessment timeliness is improving, the quality of assessments is variable. Stronger assessments are informed by the child's family history and demonstrate understanding of the impact of significant events for individual children, resulting in direct help for families. Weaker assessments are too simplistic; they lack professional curiosity and fail to analyse repeated patterns of neglectful behaviour. Some assessments do not clearly identify the next steps, and this lack of clarity has led to repeat assessments and delay for some children in their needs being met.
7. Children's plans are subject to regular, well-structured, multi-agency reviews. Progress made against each action is noted, while the plans clearly identify and agree how to address areas and which actions still require further work.

8. Social workers see children regularly. They develop a sound understanding of children's needs and lived experiences through reflective direct work and skilled observation. Trusting relationships with families enable social workers to work effectively alongside families, addressing concerns and supporting improvements. Social workers are well guided in their work with children and families through regular supervision, and are supported by clear and detailed management instructions.
9. For the majority of children, appropriate action is taken to initiate the pre-proceedings stage of the public law outline (PLO) when risks to children increase. However, for a small number of children experiencing long-term neglect, this has taken too long. The quality and rigour of legal planning meetings, letters before proceedings and PLO review meetings are mixed. While work and activity with families is closely reviewed, progression can be delayed because summaries and action plans do not consistently display the overall progress and impact of the pre-proceedings work. Once the local authority has entered court proceedings, work is of a higher standard. The local judiciary and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS) report favourably on the improvements in the timeliness and quality of evidence in court proceedings, which is reducing the need for specialist assessments.
10. Clear efforts are made by social workers to address the individual needs of children in large sibling groups in court assessments and statements. Careful attention is devoted to the potential merits, or otherwise, of removing children from their birth families. A wide range of alternative care arrangements are considered. Social workers manage to develop constructive relationships with parents during these highly stressful periods for families.
11. Disabled children are well supported by a dedicated team of social workers with specialist knowledge and understanding of their and their family's needs. Children benefit from effective relationships with their social workers, who support them to make choices and access a range of support services to help them reach their potential. For a small number of disabled children, there is evidence of drift and a lack of decisive action in progressing their child protection plans.
12. While the local authority has made some progress in raising the profile of children living in private fostering arrangements, more needs to be done to improve the identification, assessment and ongoing work with these children and their carers. Current arrangements are not sufficiently robust and do not ensure that all children have a timely assessment of needs or the opportunity to see their social workers alone. Plans to further improve practice and raise awareness across the workforce are at an early stage of development. Improvement in private fostering practice and arrangements was a recommendation from the last inspection.
13. There is a good range of suitable accommodation for young people aged 16 or 17 years who present as homeless. Homeless 16- and 17-year-olds are informed

of their rights to choose to access accommodation under s20 or s17. However, young people are not routinely provided with a full child in need assessment in line with statutory guidance. The initial assessment they receive is often limited to their immediate housing situation, which means that their wider needs are not immediately recognised.

14. The local authority's response to allegations made against people working with children, including foster carers, is effectively managed. Systems are in place to record and track allegations, to coordinate the investigation and to provide advice to professionals and organisations. Strategy meetings are chaired effectively by independent reviewing officers, and meetings are attended by key agencies to ensure that relevant information is shared and acted on to protect children.
15. The local authority works sensitively with its communities to respond appropriately to concerns about children affected by female genital mutilation and honour-based violence. Support arrangements ensure that children are protected, intervening via the courts where necessary. Effective early help services are available to support children believed to be at early risk of radicalisation.
16. Most children considered to be vulnerable to the risk of sexual and criminal exploitation have a completed risk assessment, but the quality of these tools varies, and identified risks are not always appropriately escalated. When tools are used well, risks are identified, and children become the subject of an exploitation strategy meeting. These meetings are effective, and appropriate actions are taken and reviewed. Support is intensified, when required, to ensure that work progresses, and that children are protected. For some children, this has resulted in reduced risks and better outcomes.
17. Most children who go missing from home are offered a return home interview. The number of children taking part in return interviews is proportionately low, and those that are completed are not consistently detailed enough to inform safety planning. Monitoring of practice in this area is steadily improving the timeliness and effectiveness of the response.
18. Fewer pupils are being excluded from school as a result of close work between schools and the local authority. At the same time, the number of pupils on part-time timetables is rising. Pupils who do not attend school regularly are reviewed, sometimes weekly, by officers. This reflects the local authority's aim to get pupils back into full-time education as quickly as possible and to work with parents where there are safeguarding concerns.

## **The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: Good**

19. Services for children in care have continued to develop since the last inspection, with more significant improvements in the local authority's offer and support for

care leavers. Most children come into care when it is in their best interests to do so. They live in suitable, stable placements with skilled and committed carers who meet their needs. A small number of children who have experienced long-term neglect have waited too long before entering care. However, once in care, like most other children, they make good progress.

20. Permanence planning is well considered and entered into in a timely manner to ensure that children move into permanent care arrangements at the earliest opportunity. Parallel and triple planning is apparent, and steps taken are well recorded in reviews. The adoption team's involvement is evident at early stages when this is considered as a possible option. Children's early permanence planning is closely managed to prevent drift, through careful management tracking and joint work between the permanence and court teams.
21. Children are visited regularly in line with statutory requirements, and often more frequently. Recording of visits to children is thoughtful and thorough, demonstrating positive interactions. Many children have social workers who have worked with them for some time, providing continuous, trusting relationships. This enables impactful direct work to be completed with children. Children's views are clearly exemplified in plans, assessments and reviews. The use of a consultation app to elicit children's views and aid communication is gaining traction across the service.
22. Children living at home on care orders are subject to rigorous assessments and reviews under the scrutiny of the court or placement with parents' regulations. Children placed at home are not left to drift for extended periods, and revocation of care order hearings are sought within reasonable timescales.
23. Most children who return home from care do so in a safe and planned way. However, a small number of children leave s20 accommodation in an unplanned way. In these, cases management oversight and assessments of risk are not always evident in order to ensure the appropriate level of support is made available to these children and families.
24. Social workers provide a comprehensive update of changes and progress for children's reviews. Assessments demonstrate multi-agency involvement and include the views of children, young people and parents, illustrating constructive work with children to address their needs. All children have an overarching care plan, but the quality of these varies. Many are comprehensive and clearly evidence that appropriate help and support is in place. Others do not contain enough detail to provide a clear and ambitious focus of work with children. Contingency plans are very generic and do not assist or provide clear enough directions in times of crisis.
25. Children's reviews are held within statutory timescales and are effective. Reviews are generally well attended; children are encouraged and supported to participate in the planning for their meeting, and many attend their reviews. IROs are a consistent service for children, often visiting or speaking to children

to obtain their views prior to the review meeting. Minutes are thorough, but they are not written to the child, and the language used is directed at a professional audience. Children do not receive a child-friendly copy of the report or the outcomes to the review. Not all review minutes are written up promptly in order to enable members to be clear about what has been agreed and for the required actions to be quickly followed through. Reviews are not always reconvened to consider significant events, changes of placement or changes in care plans.

26. Strong work is evident where children in care are at risk of child sexual exploitation. Thorough child sexual exploitation risk assessments are completed, and multi-agency strategy meetings are effective. Risks and vulnerabilities are evaluated, and planning is tight and well-focused. However, the response to children who go missing from care is mixed. Not all return home interviews are completed within timescale. When children refuse to engage, the implications of this are not explored in enough depth to inform subsequent work to reduce risks. Repeated missing episodes do not always result in multi-agency strategy meetings.
27. Children's health needs are reviewed within timescales. Provision to address their emotional well-being and mental health needs has significantly improved. Strength and difficulties questionnaires (SDQs) are routinely completed, and most children who require help receive targeted support from CAMHS and a range of other services. The innovative 'You Know Your Mind' personal budget system is gaining prevalence and impact, helping many children build their self-esteem through activity-based programmes.
28. Children in care are supported to do well in their education. The virtual school's senior leaders are strongly focused on the educational progress of children in care. Designated teachers are clear about their roles, and leaders use the additional funding from the pupil premium effectively. This has contributed to a steady rise in children's academic outcomes over the past four years. However, personal education plans (PEPs) are inconsistent in quality and content. Children therefore do not benefit from this additional oversight and scrutiny in order to maximise their academic performance and to ensure that their whole education experience is successfully supported.
29. Assessments of foster carers are thorough and analytical. Timescales for completing assessments are met and preparation training is good. Placements are well planned, through introductions and comprehensive information-sharing prior to children moving in. Foster carers feel valued and part of the child's team. They are good advocates for children and are extremely committed to them. Consequently, many children's experiences improve. Children from the children in care council confirmed that they benefit from secure, long-term permanent placements with their foster families.
30. Nottinghamshire is part of, and leads on, the regional adoption agency (D2N2) established in April this year. The preparation and assessment of adopters is thorough, as is the quality of reports. There is a good range of adoption support

available that can also be accessed by prospective adopters. Children and adopters are prepared well for adoption.

31. Comprehensive life-story work is undertaken with children so that they understand their own and wider family history. This is routinely in place for children placed for adoption, but is not yet prevalent for all children who have been in care for longer periods. Focused efforts are made to support children to enjoy safe quality time with their families, previous carers and other significant people from their past.
32. A small number of children live with family and friends carers who have not been fully assessed or formally approved. Senior management scrutiny and IRO oversight of these children in unregistered placements is insufficient. The rationale and reasons for these placements are not clearly articulated or documented well in care plans, children's reviews, supervision or case summaries. These carers do not all receive the necessary support, development and training to help them to effectively care for children. Viability assessments are not always completed, and when they are, decisions are not clearly recorded about the carers' suitability to progress to a full assessment. When carers are not approved, and children remain with these carers, no risk assessments or plans are evident in order to compensate for shortfalls identified in the carer assessments.
33. Following repeated placement breakdowns, a very small number of 15-year-olds are currently placed in supported accommodation for 16- and 17-year-olds. These unregulated placements receive regular scrutiny and oversight by managers while they work to identify more suitable and permanent arrangements. Social workers and placement providers ensure that these young people are provided with the support necessary to make progress while in these placements.
34. Care leavers value the effective support they receive from the care leavers service. Skilled, experienced personal advisers (PAs) ensure that care leavers are well prepared and supported during their transition to adulthood. Care leavers who are parents are well supported and are assisted to access universal services. Young people receive their health histories and are offered help to address their physical and mental health needs. Young people with significant emotional and mental health needs are offered appropriate assistance through adult mental health services and through funding from the 'You Know Your Mind' personal budget.
35. Care leavers are encouraged to meet with achievement advisers, who work closely with PAs, to access suitable education, training and employment (EET) opportunities. Many have achieved well in their education and are accessing degree programmes, further education courses and full-time employment. When young people disengage, active efforts are made to explore how to re-engage and introduce opportunities that may be more suitable. Care leavers aged from 21 to 24 receive a customised service based on their changing needs. They are



allocated to specialist PAs when their needs require it, and contact is periodically made with young people who are living independently and do not require ongoing support.

36. Pathway plans are reviewed regularly and focus on progressing important priorities. Young people's views are integrated throughout plans, ensuring that they are meaningful to young people. However, when care leavers are at risk of exploitation, this is not always addressed sufficiently well, and opportunities to understand risk more fully through specialist screening are missed.

### **The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: Good**

37. Stable leadership and strong political support have ensured that Nottinghamshire local authority has made improvements in most services for children and their families since the last inspection. Children in care and care leavers receive a good service, and most children in need of help and protection receive effective support. However, some discrete and important areas of practice, such as private fostering, multi-agency involvement in strategy meetings and the variability of social work practice, need to be improved. Children's services remain a priority for the council, and budgets continue to be protected, relieving some of the pressures on services. The chief executive officer and elected members are well informed and take an active part in overseeing services and scrutinising performance. The more recent restructure of services has devolved and strengthened oversight of vulnerable children across the large county.
38. The vast majority of children in care are well cared for and live in stable placements that meet their needs and that support them to do well. Services for care leavers have now been transformed. Regular staff supervision and management oversight is evident on most case records, steering work for children and leading to improvements in the timeliness of assessments and reviews. While the quality of assessments is still variable, they are steadily improving. Great strides have been made in developing and stabilising the workforce. These improvements in services and workforce translate into better life chances for many children and their families.
39. Partnerships are strong at a strategic level, strengthened through the challenging agendas that senior council leaders and partners have had to work through together, including the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse (IICSA). Further examples of successful partnership working are evident in the development of the Youth Violence and Child Exploitation Panel and toolkit. CAF/CASS and the courts speak positively about their relationships with senior managers, their legal counterparts and the improving quality of children's services.
40. Senior leaders have worked constructively with district councils to broaden access for children and families to services. Innovative partnerships and

developments across the county enable children in care and care leavers to have improved access to leisure, housing and employment opportunities.

41. Nottinghamshire's approach to discharging and managing its corporate parenting functions is effective. The breadth of representation of children across a wide age range is a real strength of the council. Children in care council members meaningfully participate in council business. They have regular contact with senior representatives from the virtual school, independent reviewing officers, councillors and senior managers. Children report that managers listen closely and follow up on issues raised, and this is translated into tangible achievements. Free leisure card and council tax exemptions stand out as examples.
42. Nottinghamshire has successfully led on and now manages the staff in the regional adoption agency (D2N2), which was established in April this year. Local arrangements are strong and enable effective oversight by managers to assure themselves of the quality of the services being delivered for Nottinghamshire children and families.
43. Since the last focused visit in January 2019, improvements have been made to ensure that audits clearly evaluate the quality of social work practice. A new auditing system has been introduced which enables managers to identify themes and develop action plans to improve practice. This work is still in its early stages of development, as are systems to ensure that actions identified in individual case audits are followed through.
44. Regular performance management meetings and direct contact with staff provide leaders with regularly updated practice information. Team managers and workers use performance information to support practice. Senior leaders are well sighted on and aware of the inconsistency in social work practice for some children. Staffing numbers in areas showing weaker social work practice have therefore been increased. While the social care workforce is stable in many areas, there are still teams across the county with staff turnover that impacts on the progress made in supporting vulnerable children.
45. Nottinghamshire's self-evaluation of practice gives an accurate reflection of work across the county. The council knows itself well and has clear priorities to strengthen practice to improve all services for children and their families. Most areas identified as weaknesses in this inspection are recognised by leaders, and they have existing action plans in place. However, the focus and pace of improvement in a few areas of practice, particularly within help and protection services, have been slow. The quality of social work services that children have access to vary across the county. Limited progress has been made in identifying and responding to children in private fostering arrangements. Multi-agency involvement in strategy meetings when safeguarding concerns about children are identified has not been achieved. Action that has been taken on these recommendations from the previous inspection has not resulted in consistent improvements in practice.

46. The use of unregistered and unregulated placements, while permitted by leaders, have left a small number of children in placements which do not meet regulations. A small number of children live with family and friend carers who have not been assessed or approved and where support arrangements are vague. In addition, a very small number of 15-year-olds are placed in supported accommodation for 16- and 17-year-olds. Leaders have not taken sufficient action to ensure that these placements are registered or that alternative placements are secured in a timely manner.
47. Frontline social workers' caseloads are steadily reducing, and most workers describe their workloads as manageable. Social work capacity has been increased, and practice consultants and additional support roles have been created. Staff in their assessed and supported year in employment are well supported. In addition, social workers have access to a wide range of services, including targeted support from the family service, to assist them in their work with children and families. Many staff are positive about working for Nottinghamshire and welcome the changes made.
48. Staff value Nottinghamshire's training offer. They receive regular and relevant training opportunities, which are developing their professional knowledge and practice. Work is underway to ensure that all staff operate within the council's recognised strength-based approach.
49. Staff receive regular supervision and management support, which they highly value and which assists them in progressing children's plans.



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