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Dear Colin

Focused visit to Nottinghamshire County Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Nottinghamshire children's services on 26 to 27 April 2022. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Tom Anthony and Maire Atherton.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need or subject to a child protection plan.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. This visit was carried out fully with inspectors on site. They looked at a range of evidence, including children's records. They talked to parents, representatives of partner agencies, practitioners and managers.

Headline findings

A strong senior leadership team is supported by corporate and political leaders who have made significant financial investments, reflecting the priority given to protecting and helping children at risk or in need. Leaders have maintained and, in some areas, improved the quality of service that is provided to children in need since the last full ILACS inspection, in October 2019, despite the significant challenges created by COVID-19 restrictions. Leaders know there is more work to do to ensure that all children receive a consistently effective quality of service that supports them to make progress with the urgency they deserve. In particular, children are not consistently benefiting from purposeful direct work, and management supervision is not always ensuring that children make sufficient progress. Some more recent developments, including a new approach to auditing, have not yet had an impact on the support that children receive. A range of activity is helping to address the challenge of recruiting and retaining social workers, and many children and families are supported by practitioners with whom they can build trusting and effective relationships over time.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice?

- Consistent provision and recording of purposeful direct work with children.
- The quantity and quality of case file audits and their impact in identifying improvements for individual children and learning for the organisation.
- The impact of supervision and management oversight in driving progress for all children.

Main findings

Children are visited regularly and frequently. This helps social workers develop their understanding of children's lives and the impact of family and parental behaviours on them. No children were found to be inadequately protected during this visit. However, some children are only seen at school or in the presence of their parents, which limits the opportunities for social workers to gain a full understanding of their experiences. In addition, there is not always a clear purpose for the visit, and the focus is sometimes too much on the adults rather than the children.

There is not always evidence of direct work being undertaken or recorded on children's records. When direct work is undertaken, it helps children to communicate and explain their daily routines and the care that they receive. This improves the quality of assessments that social workers complete because they have a better understanding of children's experiences.

Children are being supported at the right level of need. However, case direction at the point of allocation as well as within supervision is not always sufficiently focused, time bound or detailed in order to ensure that social workers know how best to support children. The quality of plans remains varied. In better cases, targeted plans clearly identify and address activity that will help keep children safe and meet their needs. In these cases, effective multi-agency working and attendance at core group or child-in-need review meetings mean that children's progress is monitored, and parents and partner agencies are held to account for their actions.

Some children's plans lack precision and do not allow for meaningful measurement of progress. As a result, children may stay on plans longer than necessary. Some plans do not sufficiently focus on the needs of all children in the family and others are too adult focused and insufficiently challenging of parental perspectives.

There is varied evidence of involving extended family in protecting children at the earliest opportunity through establishing support networks. In some cases, the effective and purposeful use of ecomaps, genograms and family group conferences helps identify sources of support to children from within their own networks. In other cases, there were missed opportunities to use wider family support.

At the time of the last full inspection, the use of strategy meetings and the attendance of partner agencies were identified as areas where further improvement was needed. A multi-agency working group established by the Nottinghamshire Safeguarding Children Partnership has delivered improvements in the effectiveness and attendance at strategy meetings. Although there is more progress to be made, the engagement of health and police services has improved.

Child protection conferences are now delivered using a strengths-based approach in which families are the first to talk about what is going well and what is going less well for their children. Some children and their families receive no further social work support after the conference has decided that the objectives of the child protection plan have been met. This may be too abrupt for some families after long periods of social work support.

When it is difficult to achieve progress for children, senior managers review children's plans within a complex case panel. This provides senior managers with overview of and shared responsibility for some of the most complex and challenging families. The panel makes recommendations about how to make progress, including, when necessary, taking cases to legal planning meetings. Recommendations from the panel are not always swiftly used within subsequent supervision and casework planning.

When children's situations remain seriously concerning, Public Law Outline (PLO) pre-proceedings are used appropriately. Letters before proceedings provide families with clarity about the serious nature of concerns and what needs to change to avoid entry into the court arena and children entering care. Management oversight and tracking of these children are thorough.

For a small number of children, minutes and records of critical events and meetings, including legal and PLO meetings, are not available. This can mean that social workers and children who wish to view their records cannot access information about key decisions affecting their lives.

Specialist intensive support, including for children on the edge of care, provided by the Family Service is successful in achieving change and informing next steps for children and families. Effective multi-agency communication is maintained, and when progress is not being made or risks are increasing for children, decision-making is timely and effective in providing children with the right services.

Support for disabled children and their families is not consistent. Some receive timely, tailored interventions that meet needs and enable parents to continue to care for their children. Others experience some drift and delay in receiving the right support.

Inspectors spoke to parents whose children have received support from social workers. Parents appreciate and value the professional and respectful support that

they have received from social workers describing support that went 'above and beyond'. Partner agencies report that communication with children's services is improving, and, although they are not always given sufficient notice to attend meetings, they are confident that their views are listened to and that they can challenge decisions when required.

Significant numbers of social workers have worked for Nottinghamshire County Council for many years and this stability provides a good basis for the relational and strength-based practice that is being embedded across the organisation.

The leadership team has put in place arrangements to maximise the time that social workers can devote to working with children and families. Social workers receive invaluable support from social work support officers who undertake a range of case-specific administrative tasks. This creates more time for practitioners to work with children and families. Social work assistants are used well to complete dedicated pieces of direct work to support children and their families. Leaders know that alternatively qualified practitioners may go on to become qualified social workers and nurture this source of future practitioners. The authority also engages well with social work education through their leadership of the local teaching partnership.

Supervision takes place regularly and provides support for staff but does not consistently offer sufficient case direction to improve children's circumstances. Staff value group supervision and their access to support and advice from practice consultants and advanced practitioners.

Caseloads across the service are monitored and staff are confident that, when necessary, managers take action to reduce the numbers of children and families that they are working with. Elected councillors and the chief executive have a good knowledge of the breadth of operational activity and understand the impact of high caseloads on the ability to provide help and protection to vulnerable children. When required, senior leaders have been successful in their requests for additional resources with which to deploy additional temporary staff to alleviate the burden of work by reducing the numbers of children supported by each worker.

The newly developed collaborative approach to case auditing is in its infancy. Very few child in need and child protection cases have been audited over the last six months. This means that auditing is not yet providing leaders with a reliable line of sight to front line practice. It is not yet routinely being used to identify actions to improve support to children, nor is it identifying learning to help improve services across the organisation.

An extensive range of training and development opportunities are available to staff. They value the access to learning and development in order to support their professional development and improve the quality of support they can offer to children and their families.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning the next inspection or visit.

Yours sincerely

Tom Anthony
Her Majesty's Inspector