

# Inspection of Nottinghamshire County Council local authority children's services

**Inspection dates:** 20 to 24 May 2024

**Lead inspector:** Nicki Shaw, His Majesty's Inspector

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

The director of children's services and the highly effective leadership team are aspirational for children and young people in Nottinghamshire. Clear strategic direction, effective partnerships and strong political and corporate support for children's services have sustained and improved services for children and families since the last inspection in 2019. Significant investment in children's services and the ongoing transformation of the multi-agency safeguarding hub are helping children to receive support at the earliest opportunity. This is ensuring children receive the right support at the right time.

Leaders have a comprehensive understanding of the service's strengths and the areas for ongoing development to improve the lives of children and young people. Leaders and managers have developed a robust, strengths-based and child-focused culture that has permeated the organisation. A relentless focus by leaders on improving the working conditions for social workers has created an environment where social work can flourish.

## What needs to improve?

- Consistency in convening and undertaking strategy meetings.
- The quality of target setting in personal education plans, with a clear focus on precisely what needs to improve or the intended result for children in care.
- The effectiveness of support to care leavers to access and sustain employment, education or training.

## The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: good

1. Children and their families benefit from a range of early help support tailored to their needs. Comprehensive early help assessments include all family members, and children's views are gathered using a wide range of tools. When risks escalate, children's needs are considered promptly by the multi-agency safeguarding hub. Children who no longer need statutory intervention but require ongoing help and support have a smooth transition to early help services.
2. Contacts and referrals are managed swiftly and efficiently by experienced and skilled social workers in the multi-agency safeguarding hub. Professionals understand levels of need and provide detailed information to support decision-making. Social workers make effective use of children's histories to inform the analysis of risk and need, and timely and proportionate decision-making.
3. When the threshold for progression to children's services is not met, informative targeted advice and signposting are provided to families. The consultation line facilitates open professional conversations and advice, helping to build a shared understanding of risks and needs with multi-agency partners.
4. Most child and family assessments are completed promptly and contain comprehensive information to help identify how the needs of children and families can be met. Children are sensitively engaged through purposeful direct work during assessments and their views and experiences inform decisions and plans. Most practitioners use a neglect tool kit that provides more insight into children's circumstances. For most children and families, prompt support and help are provided as a result. In some assessments, engagement of fathers is not always sufficiently detailed. Disabled children benefit from comprehensive assessments and plans to ensure that their needs are met. Most children's and families' circumstances and outcomes improve because of the effectiveness of interventions to reduce risks to children.
5. Strategy discussions are well attended by the right professionals and comprehensively consider children's risks and needs. Most decisions are proportionate and congruent with the information shared. However, for a small number of children, strategy discussions have not taken place when the

threshold was met. When risk escalates, timely assessments are initiated in which children are seen, their history is considered and risks carefully analysed. Decisions to escalate to a child protection conference are well considered.

6. Child protection conference summaries and minutes are clear, outlining plans to reduce risks to children. Child protection chairs scrutinise the progress of children's plans through midway reviews. Planned intervention helps make children safer, and decisions to escalate or conclude child protection plans are well evidenced. Regular core groups and child-in-need planning meetings fully engage agencies involved with children and their families. Most children are stepped up or stepped down appropriately between child protection and child-in-need plans as risks and needs change.
7. Diligent and effective tracking underpins appropriate use of the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline for children. Robust management oversight enables any potential delays to be identified and tackled promptly. Many children who are the subject of pre-proceedings successfully exit without the need to initiate legal proceedings, enabling them to be cared for by their families. Public Law Outline letters to parents before proceedings are comprehensive and clear. Children who enter care proceedings are allocated a specialist court social worker who brings expertise and skill to completing rigorous assessments, which then inform subsequent court decisions.
8. Social workers demonstrate curiosity and strong analytical skills when responding to risks when children go missing from home. Practitioners use screening tools for exploitation and harmful sexual behaviours effectively. A range of clear multi-agency pathways are triggered for children assessed as being at greater risk. Most children receive proportionate and holistic interventions to address emerging or actual risks.
9. Most children who go missing from home and care are routinely offered a return home interview, conducted by staff who know them best. Records of return home interviews are routinely shared with police to support intelligence-gathering. As a result, there have been some successful disruptions of perpetrators' activities.
10. Confident and skilled social workers are well supported by managers, who provide close oversight and timely decisions at key points in children's journeys. This is a noticeable improvement since the focused visit in 2022.
11. A single point of contact ensures that any concerns about children missing education get directed to the right team. Each team works closely with these children to make sure that they get help to increase their engagement with education.
12. Children aged 16 and 17 at risk of homelessness are assessed and supported promptly by social workers and rapid assessment workers. Children are

promptly offered the option of becoming looked after in suitable arrangements. Social workers ensure children fully understand their rights.

13. Young carers benefit from a range of commissioned services and have personal budgets to enable them to access short breaks and recreational activities. Carers groups are also available, which provide young carers with opportunities to have fun, learn skills and meet other children in similar circumstances.
14. Arrangements to support and safeguard privately fostered children in Nottinghamshire are embedded and well managed. Effective monitoring arrangements are in place to ensure these children's needs are met. This is a noticeable improvement since the inspection in 2019.
15. There are clear procedures for schools to follow when parents indicate they intend to home educate their child. Prompt contact with the family and ongoing checks allow the local authority to seek assurance that the child is safe.
16. The local authority designated officer (LADO) allegation management process is effective and highly developed. It ensures that adults of concern are proportionately risk managed through balanced and careful investigations, and that children are safeguarded.
17. A well-coordinated emergency duty service responds in a timely fashion to children in need out of office hours. Effective information-sharing with the daytime teams ensures seamless coordination.

### **The experiences and progress of children in care: good**

18. Children become looked after when it is their best interests to do so. When children cannot return home safely, timely decisions are made to ensure work to provide a permanent and stable home is progressed promptly. Children are well supported to live with their families in kinship arrangements whenever possible. Skilled and experienced social workers complete assessments to ensure the suitability of arrangements within children's extended family networks. Comprehensive and detailed placement-with-parent assessments provide a solid and informed foundation for a phased return home for those children who can return to their parents' care.
19. Some children living in kinship care benefit from bespoke and flexible support, which alleviates financial difficulties and creates stability. This includes children from other local authorities, where leaders support these children because they are in need and it is the right thing to do.
20. Children benefit from purposeful relationships with their social workers, who know their children well. Children are actively engaged through play or meaningful conversations that ensure their views are captured to inform their plans. Social workers use thoughtful and sensitive language. This has enabled

children to develop trusting and nurturing relationships with their social workers.

21. Disabled children in care live in settled foster homes with skilled and nurturing carers who are meeting their complex health needs. Disabled children are settled in school and are making good progress. They have planned time with the people who are important to them.
22. Children have up-to-date care plans and social workers write comprehensive reports before reviews which update an assessment of the child's needs. The quality and accessibility of records of children's reviews vary. Leaders have introduced a new template to improve the quality of records to promote a more consistent approach. Plans for family time are changed to reflect children's emerging needs and in response to children's wishes. Most children enjoy enduring relationships throughout their childhood with the people who are important to them.
23. The virtual school is extremely ambitious, effective and aspirational for children in care. The team collaborates very closely with schools, both in the local authority and out of the county, to ensure that children who are looked after benefit from a suitable education provision and are well prepared for their next steps. Schools and carers are full of praise for the support that they, and the children they look after, receive.
24. The quality of personal education plans has improved. Plans focus strongly on the views of the children. However, targets sometimes lack a clear focus on precisely what needs to improve or the intended result. The virtual school tracks the educational achievements, attendance and suspensions of children in care closely. It uses this information carefully to enhance the support available to any children in care who need it.
25. Children's health needs are well considered in care plans and reviews. Most children's health needs are well met. A commissioned service is used positively to provide children in care and care leavers with a grant to support their mental health. This supports children to engage in social and recreational activities which promote their well-being.
26. Social workers are confident in identifying and responding to any risks associated with exploitation, and they carry out high-quality risk assessments, which are regularly updated. They are skilled in supporting children who have experienced exploitation and children whose behaviour is harmful to themselves and others. This is helping to reduce risks for some children.
27. Children living in unregistered children's homes are visited weekly by their social workers, and these visits inform weekly managerial oversight meetings. This provides assurance about children's welfare while registered provision is identified. However, the oversight and scrutiny of children living in unregistered

children's homes by their independent reviewing officer are not always evident on children's records.

28. Thoughtful and sensitive support is provided to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children from the point of their arrival in England by social workers in the specialist unaccompanied asylum-seeking children team. Children live in suitable accommodation and their health and emotional needs are met. These children benefit from purposeful activities, as well as attending education. A commissioned service provides unaccompanied asylum-seeking children with opportunities to socialise and become engaged in the community, as well as developing their social and language skills.
29. The local authority has experienced challenges in recruiting sufficient foster carers to meet the needs of Nottinghamshire's children. Leaders know they have some children in residential care who would benefit from moving to a foster placement. Leaders have plans to address these challenges, such as introducing an alternative fostering model and an initiative to recruit specific carers for children with complex needs.
30. Fostering and adoption panel arrangements are effective. The diverse and experienced panel members apply their knowledge, expertise and inquisitiveness when evaluating prospective foster carers and adopters. The effective arrangements facilitate effective communication, oversight and scrutiny between Adoption East Midlands and the local authority.
31. The children in care council, No Labels, is an established group. Children and young people know senior leaders well. Children say they feel listened to and that concerns they raise are taken seriously and responded to by leaders. No Labels has influenced and shaped improvements to services, such as the local offer being made available on an app.
32. Leaders recognise the vulnerabilities of children leaving care who are experiencing changes at a critical point in their life. They have responded by introducing a transitional personal adviser to work alongside social workers. This provides intensive support to children in care and care leavers to ensure they are supported effectively into adulthood.

### **The experiences and progress of care leavers: good**

33. Care leavers benefit from positive and trusting relationships with their personal advisers (PAs), who are sensitive to their needs. Meaningful conversations support care leavers to share their worries so that the right support can be provided. This enables care leavers to make progress and achieve their ambitions.
34. The health and emotional well-being of care leavers are well supported. Care leavers receive targeted support and specialist provision to meet their needs.

This includes support to address substance misuse and support to manage neurodiversity or parenting.

35. Care leavers in custody benefit from PAs who are strong advocates for them. These PAs are determined and persistent in their endeavours to engage and sustain relationships. PAs are in touch with all care leavers in custody under the age of 21.
36. Care leavers aged 21 and over benefit from stable and reliable relationships with their PA. If care leavers decide they do not require an allocated PA, contact is still maintained through a duty system. Drop-in support ensures care leavers have access to timely support. Care leavers experiencing difficulties and requiring more intensive support are allocated a named PA.
37. Most care leavers engage in developing their pathway plans but the quality of plans is not consistent. Pathway plans identify needs and clear interventions are provided to enable young people to live independently. However, the format and length of plans are overwhelming for some care leavers.
38. The offer of practical and emotional support to assist care leavers moving into independence is a strength of the authority. Support from the achievement team ensures that care leavers have access to important documents such as their health passport, driving licence and National Insurance number. Care leavers receive good support from well-being workers to explore their life histories.
39. Strong and effective partnerships with education providers ensure care leavers are supported to achieve in education and training. The local authority actively supports care leavers with employment opportunities through ring fencing apprenticeships with the council. Some care leavers are supported to go to university. However, not all 19- to 21-year-old care leavers benefit from employment, education or training.
40. The local offer is ambitious, accessible and well promoted. It details clearly the support care leavers can receive. The local offer for care leavers in custody or those who are parents or who were unaccompanied asylum-seeking children ensures they receive clear information and support in line with their specific needs. Care leavers are helped to understand their rights and entitlements by their PAs, who actively promote the services available to them.
41. Care leavers are supported by specialist advisers to apply for housing tenancies when they are ready, and they are prioritised for housing at the earliest opportunity. Most care leavers are in suitable accommodation. Leaders in Nottinghamshire pioneered and secured care leaver status as a protected characteristic.

42. Care leavers spoke positively about the support they receive from leaders and their committed PAs. Care leavers feel cared for.

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

43. The highly visible and effective leadership team has significantly influenced change to improve the experiences and progress of children in Nottinghamshire. Leaders are child-focused and have very effectively inspired others, in the council, the partnership and wider community, to change the lives of children and families. Political and corporate leaders are committed and active corporate parents and are ambitious for children and young people. There has been significant investment in children's services since 2019. This includes investment in the council sufficiency strategy to develop five new children's homes and financial support to transform the multi-agency safeguarding hub to a needs-led front door service. Leaders are investing in the development of the family safeguarding team, and family hubs are being established across the county. The local authority has funded additional provision to further develop kinship care.
44. Leaders have developed a highly responsive and effective LADO service. The service ensures that adults of concern are proportionately risk managed through balanced and careful investigations, and that affected children are safeguarded. Collaborative work between children's and adults' safeguarding teams provides a holistic approach and assessment of risks.
45. Services are creative and innovative and the highly effective partnerships with key stakeholders are well developed, supporting continued improvements for vulnerable children. There is strong cross-party political and senior support and professional challenge to improve children's outcomes. The chief executive is highly ambitious for children and has a comprehensive understanding of the priorities for improving the lives of the most vulnerable children. They and the lead member are very well informed about the needs of the service, through regular assurance meetings with the director of children's services and cabinet meetings.
46. The corporate plan is comprehensive and details significant ambitions for children and families. Leaders have worked closely with all the directorates in the council and the nine district councils across Nottinghamshire to ensure children and families are prioritised. Capital investment has been used to rebuild the children's contact centre, to ensure this is a comfortable place for children to have family time.
47. Services for care leavers are very well developed. The local offer is strong and provides a range of support and services for care leavers. The support provided to unaccompanied children seeking asylum is highly effective. Despite some pressures, leaders have been resilient to these challenges and have taken more



children than they are required to do through the national transfer scheme. This has meant that some children arriving in the UK in friendship groups have been able to stay together and have been placed with other children from their country of origin.

48. The range of placements for children in Nottinghamshire is an area of challenge. However, the authority has a very detailed and realistic sufficiency plan. This is helping them to make excellent progress in increasing and improving the range of placement options for children. The local authority has recently recruited 15 additional foster carers to meet the needs of children with complex needs, and plans are being progressed to open five children's homes.
49. Leaders are highly committed to continuous improvement and developing a strong learning culture. Leaders and managers are thoughtful and reflective. The self-evaluation is comprehensive and provides a detailed appraisal of the service strengths, challenges and areas for development. Children and families have contributed to the self-evaluation. Their feedback clearly illustrates the effectiveness of help and support they have received.
50. The front door change programme has significantly transformed the multi-agency safeguarding hub, where practice is collaborative, focusing on earlier help for children and families through the multi-agency partnership. This is ensuring that children get the right help at the right time.
51. Leaders have developed a comprehensive range of structures that drive learning and improvement. This includes regular management information performance reporting and learning from practice and complaints, which provide leaders with a line of sight to practice and performance. Well-developed and established panel arrangements provide effective management oversight, direction and support to social workers.
52. A strong learning culture is highly evident in Nottinghamshire. An improved quality assurance framework includes a quality of practice review tool that is comprehensive and structured to evaluate effectively the quality of social work practice. Stronger audits provide reflective space for practitioners, and discussions draw out aspirations for children and the practice that is needed to achieve them. Assurance activity is being further strengthened to ensure children and families are consistently engaged in providing feedback to the local authority to influence and shape service delivery. Learning from audits is captured in an improvement plan, and a range of forums contribute to a system-wide understanding of practice, such as the practice improvement meeting. This ensures that service delivery is consistently informed and improved by feedback.
53. Significant investment in workforce development has enabled leaders and managers to create an environment where social work can thrive. The cultural shift within children's services is well embedded in the workforce. Social

workers consistently described being very well supported through regular supervision. They describe managers as accessible, supportive and reflective. Well-structured sessions provide practitioners with protected reflective space for them to share and learn from each other. Good practice and staff achievements are well celebrated by leaders on a regular basis.

54. There is a relentless focus by leaders on staff recruitment and retention. The local authority has secured Department for Education (DfE) employer support funding, enabling them to recruit additional social work apprentices. They have also developed routes into social work by partnering with Frontline to establish two Frontline units. Leaders have recently applied to the DfE to join the Early Career Framework programme. This will further strengthen the retention of social workers and support social work career development.
55. Social workers have manageable caseloads, so they can support children and families effectively. The preferred practice model is embedded across the service. Strengths-based relational practice is evidenced in children's records. Most children's records are written in language that is sensitive and caring.
56. Learning and development opportunities are available to staff, as well as career progression pathways. Staff from Black and global majority backgrounds are well supported to access the Black & Asian Leadership Initiative programme.

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