

# Nottingham City Council

## Inspection of children’s social care services (pilot inspection)<sup>1</sup>

Inspection dates: 23 January to 3 February 2017

Lead inspector: Jenny Turnross HMI

Judgement	Grade
<b>The impact of leaders on practice with children and families</b>	<b>Good</b>
<b>The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection</b>	<b>Good</b>
<b>The experiences and progress of children looked after and care leavers, and achieving permanence</b>	<b>Requires improvement to be good</b>
<b>Overall effectiveness</b>	<b>Good</b>

Children’s services in Nottingham City have strong political and corporate support. This ensures that children’s needs are prioritised. The chief executive, the director of children’s services and the lead member for children’s services have a clear vision that has resulted in an effective plan to improve services for children and families. Nottingham City’s children’s social care services are now good, which is significant progress since the last inspection, in 2014, when the council was judged to require improvement under the single inspection framework.

Leaders in the local authority have successfully created an environment where social work practice can flourish. This is seen in the creative ways of working that are making a positive difference to children and families. The catalyst for this change was the creation of one children’s integrated services directorate and the

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<sup>1</sup> The findings in this report are based on a pilot undertaken by Ofsted to test proposed new arrangements for the inspection of local authority children’s social care services. The inspection framework and methodology used may change before Ofsted introduce the new arrangements in January 2018.

establishment of a permanent and stable senior leadership team. The council has prioritised investment in a number of services for children that include:

- the integrated locality offer
- building a stable, secure and skilled workforce
- the implementation of a new electronic case recording system.

The social work model is well embedded. It supports social workers and family support workers in delivering robust and effective interventions in families.

## **What needs to improve**

Services for some children are not yet good:

- The council has not been tenacious enough in sustaining contact and support for a small but significant number of care leavers. The current circumstances of these care leavers are unknown and therefore the local authority is not able to provide support if this is needed.
- The council do not respond robustly enough when young people present as homeless.
- The council does not always fully understand the reasons why children go missing and therefore does not always give children the help that they need.
- Independent reviewing officers do not have the capacity to sufficiently monitor the progress of children's plans between review meetings.

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

1. A wide range of effective early help services for children and their families minimises risks and improves children's welfare. Early help and targeted services are now based in the children and families direct team – the 'front door' of children's services. This means that children who do not require a social work response, but who still have needs, are referred to a wide range of more suitable services. Consequently, very few referrals to children's services result in no further action.
2. Effective early help assessments and plans with appropriately managed 'step across' arrangements are resulting in positive outcomes. A range of effective services such as multi systemic therapy, emotional health and well-being support and targeted family support are helping families and reducing risks to children.
3. Partners use the recently revised multi-agency request form consistently well to communicate their concerns and make referrals. They respond to contacts quickly and there are no delays on clearly identified safeguarding cases.

4. In a small number of cases seen, social workers did not have timely access to all key information requested by the children and families direct team. The absence of this information limited the initial assessments of risks to children, and weakened the initial decision making in these cases. However, assessments were commenced quickly and children were seen and spoken to, which ensured concerns were swiftly identified and addressed.
5. The council's recognition of domestic abuse has been strengthened by a joint partnership initiative known as 'operation encompass'. This resource, which is based at the front door of children's services, is increasing partner agency awareness of the risks for children affected by domestic abuse. These agencies are then supporting children at risk in a more timely way.
6. Social workers' assessments of cases are more consistently timely and of good quality. Assessments are informed by multi-agency information and children's views are clear. They are dynamic and change when emerging issues arise, supported by good contingency planning in place. Assessments lead to appropriate recommendations and purposeful initial plans.
7. Plans for children promote their safety and welfare. The plans set out clearly what needs to happen to improve children's circumstances. This is particularly the case in child protection planning, where parents are helped to understand the concerns for their children. When children are made subject to child protection plans, partner agencies work effectively with families to improve children's circumstances. Partners use the local authority's adopted model of social work practice well in child protection conferences. Partners contribute fully to child protection planning and parents understand exactly what needs to happen.
8. Social workers and family support workers complete purposeful work with children and their families that is leading to improved outcomes in many aspects of their lives. Social workers are used to working directly with children and families as part of their day-to-day practice and carry this out with great sensitivity. Social workers consider children's views carefully and record children's wishes and feelings clearly in assessments and plans. The multi-systemic therapy team and the edge of care team provide practical support to families that have complex and enduring needs. This important service is supporting children to remain at home and is reducing the numbers of children who need to be looked after.
9. Parenting assessments, which are completed by family support workers, inform daily living plans to support parents in caring for their children. This is one example of how well professionals understand the diverse needs of children. They also make continued efforts to ensure that children live with their families when this is in the children's best interests.

10. The help and protection offered to children by the Disabled Children's Team is effective. Sensitive work leads to tailored packages of support for children and their families. Social workers in the Disabled Children's Team identify and respond to emerging welfare needs and risks appropriately.
11. The multi-agency child sexual exploitation panel (MASE) offers a valuable response to all children who are at risk of sexual exploitation. There are a small number of children who are at significant risk of child sexual exploitation; these children are appropriately made subjects of child protection plans. The impact of planning and support for these children is further monitored in MASE, where a RAG (red amber green) rating system is used to identify those children at highest risk. A range of services, including voluntary agencies, provide 'wraparound' support. They are contributing to the protection and support of children from being identified to, when necessary, becoming children looked after.
12. Staff do not consistently carry out return home interviews when children go missing, including children looked after. They therefore do not explore the reasons why children go missing, which limits their ability to construct and implement appropriate risk management plans. Managers do not oversee return home interviews consistently or effectively enough.
13. Leaders and managers make sure that the out-of-hours emergency duty service is appropriately resourced. Staff ensure that responses to children who go missing and child protection episodes that arise overnight or at weekends are timely, thorough and clearly documented. The service recently moved to the police headquarters because senior leaders recognise that improving communication outside of normal working hours will further strengthen the response to children, particularly when child protection concerns arise.
14. Children who are privately fostered are appropriately identified. The fostering arrangements are assessed and allocated family support workers visit children and their carers regularly to ensure that any emerging needs or risks are responded to. Family support workers establish positive relationships with the children and their carers.
15. Local authority arrangements for considering allegations or concerns about paid employees or volunteers working with children are effective. Referrals from a wide range of organisations show the high levels of engagement across the professional network. Records of strategy meetings and clarity of actions and recommendations are of a consistently high standard.
16. The response to young people aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless is inconsistent. Some young people receive high levels of support, while others are not suitably assessed. As a result, the local authority cannot be certain that staff have identified and met the needs of all young people at risk of homelessness, including those who should become looked after.

## **The experiences and progress of children looked after and care leavers and achieving permanence require improvement to be good**

17. Social workers base their decisions about children becoming looked after on comprehensive, multi-agency, risk-based assessments. Many children who become looked after are already known to services, because efforts have been made to support them within their birth families. In a small number of cases, social workers could have acted sooner and children would have benefited from earlier permanence planning. However, once children become looked after, the response to securing permanence for them is proportionate and appropriate. Adoption is considered for all children, where appropriate, and is achieved for brothers and sisters, for older children and for children with complex needs. A significant minority of care leavers are not receiving a good enough support because services have not been sufficiently robust in sustaining or re-establishing contact.
18. Effective processes support permanence planning. Social workers complete a comprehensive fact-finding template, which includes information from 'danger statements'<sup>2</sup> and evidence of previous support provided to the family, before considering legal action. This work appropriately supports social workers: it helps their thinking and consideration of thresholds when considering legal intervention. Social workers use the public law outline with purpose, limiting the process to a maximum of 12 weeks; this short timescale reduces drift and delay. Local authority solicitors support social workers to give clear written agreements to parents. This enables timely decisions for permanence through the court process. Family network meetings are contributing to carefully considered and thorough viability assessments of family members. This means that children are remaining in the care of their birth family and extended family where it is appropriate and in their best interests. Absent parents are included in legal planning to ensure that their views are fully represented. Court statements and plans are based on assessments, are logical and succinct.
19. Team managers monitor the appropriateness of placements and the legal status of children who are accommodated (section 20) regularly using a formal tracking system. This reduces drift and delay. Children who return home are supported well through clear assessments and strong multi-agency plans, reducing the numbers of children becoming looked after again.
20. Social workers know their children well and carry out effective direct work that reflects their wishes and feelings. This valuable work informs planning for children's futures. Care plans are child-focused. They include clear actions and they are regularly reviewed. However, the independent reviewing officer (IRO) service that is responsible for the oversight and scrutiny of these plans, does

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<sup>2</sup> Simple statements about a child's behaviour and the specific worry agencies have about the child in the present and into the future.

not have sufficient capacity to monitor the progress of plans in between their review meetings; in a small number of cases, children's plans drift as a result, leading to delays in securing permanence.

21. Creative and effective family-finding is successfully identifying permanent homes for children. Social workers are using helpful DVDs to encourage adopters to think widely about the children they want to parent, including older children. Ambitious efforts to support older children moving from residential care, where this is in their best interests, are leading to successful placements with foster carers. Children's profiles provide detailed accounts of their circumstances. The service has successfully found adopters and foster carers for some children with very complex needs.
22. Adopters and special guardians are thoroughly assessed and given appropriate support that is sensitive to their needs and the complexities of the children they care for. Effective use of the adoption support fund provides enduring packages of support for children with additional needs. Very sensitive approaches to adopters agreeing contact arrangements with family members and support for parents when writing letters to their birth children are examples of strong practice. Later life letters give a full and sensitive account of a child's early history providing further evidence of a lifelong consideration of children, birth parents and adopters.
23. The agency decision maker brings timely, independent views and positive challenge to the important decisions in children's lives. The fostering and adoption panel is well maintained and reflects the diverse characteristics of the local children looked after population. The panel adviser is experienced and knowledgeable and has an effective overview of the quality of work submitted to the fostering and adoption panels. Social workers are given constructive feedback on their reports, leading to improved practice.
24. Children looked after live in stable and secure homes where they are supported to live full and enjoyable lives. Carers are supported to provide high-quality homes that can look after brothers and sisters together. Very careful consideration is given to children living with carers who can meet their needs. When placement issues arise, appropriate action is taken to address and resolve them. Robust quality assurance is in place to oversee and ensure the quality of both local authority placements and purchased placements.
25. Education outcomes for children looked after are improving through the work of the virtual school and carers' commitment to support children's education. Good oversight of the pupil premium plus, together with funding from the virtual school, ensures that children's needs are met at home and school. Funding is used effectively for mentors, counselling and behaviour support to ensure that children are ready to learn. Despite this, personal education plans (PEPs) are not yet consistently good. Many lack clear educational targets. As a result, it is often not clear how these plans will lead to improved attainment for children or how progress will be monitored.

26. Children's health needs, including their emotional health needs, are regularly reviewed and carers help children to access appropriate services. Some care leavers have to wait too long for their 'important health information'. This means that not all care leavers fully understand their health history when they need to.
27. Most care leavers benefit from a range of support and services that help them into independence. Pathway plans are good when young people are engaged and many care leavers live in settled accommodation. Most care leavers are supported to achieve educationally or through training and employment and they go on to enjoy a positive life. Young people who are engaged are seen regularly by their personal advisers and it is clear that they have positive relationships with them.
28. Personal advisers are not tenacious in keeping in touch with those care leavers who may need help and support. This means that a small but significant number of care leavers lose touch with services. As a result, their needs are not known or understood. This includes some of the potentially most vulnerable young people. Of concern, care leavers who are not engaging are overseen by a senior personal adviser or the team manager. These young people, some of whom are in custody, do not receive the same level of oversight or support as other care leavers. Efforts to find and engage with these young people are not sufficiently rigorous or clear. Consequently, the welfare of these care leavers is not being well monitored or supported.
29. Although there are a wide range of accommodation options for care leavers, the local authority has identified 25 young people who are living in unsuitable accommodation. However, inspectors saw other young people who are living in unsuitable homes who did not feature on this list. The data is not accurate. This means that not all care leavers' circumstances are known.
30. A dedicated personal adviser works very successfully with engaged care leavers who are not in education, employment or training. Seventy-four care leavers have benefited from this resource in the last year. A good range of providers support young people to gain recognised qualifications. The council is highly committed to supporting care leaver apprenticeships and does so with much success. Fifteen young people are currently at university and they are well supported emotionally and financially. However, more needs to be done to motivate and engage the small number of care leavers who do not wish to be in education, employment or training so that they are supported to have the best possible opportunities to experience a positive start to their adult lives.
31. Children looked after and care leavers' views are heard through the vibrant and influential children in care council (CiCC) and care leavers' forum. The director of children's services (DCS) and the lead member for children's services meet regularly with the young people. The CiCC and the forum have analysed the feedback from a recent 'have your say' survey of children looked after. This work has provided valuable information about children's experiences. The local authority has told children that it will be used to inform future service provision.

## **The impact of leaders on practice with children and families is good**

32. The local authority has successfully created an environment where social work practice can flourish. A well-established social work model of practice provides a framework for workers to understand the needs and risks for children and this supports conversations with families. Management oversight and direction in most of the service are good. Clear and unambiguous decision-making by team managers, supported by effective supervision for social workers, supports safe social work practice, a strong management grip and a culture of learning. This helps social workers to have a calm approach to practice. As a result of their measured approach, assessments and plans for most children are consistently good.
33. Leaders and managers have created an organisational culture that enables social workers and family support workers to develop positive relationships with children and their families. Inspectors saw work, which showed that they know their children well. Effective use of a wide range of tools with children's voices strongly threading through assessments is clearly evident. A preferred model of social work practice is used consistently and effectively to understand children's lives. This, along with manageable caseloads, means that social workers can spend enough time with children and their families.
34. The local authority has invested heavily in an integrated model of partnership working. Many services are, therefore, delivered jointly to children. The development and implementation of the locality hubs are resulting in children receiving the right help at the right time. As planned by the local authority, fewer children are becoming looked after. For those who are looked after, there are improvements in the quality of placements and care planning. This is resulting in children living in secure and well supported homes. Care leavers do not receive a consistently good service as the service is not proactively making efforts to keep in touch with all care leavers. This is an area of weakness.
35. Learning from peer reviews is improving services and supporting the shape of future provision. However, the experiences of children are not yet systematically captured, through case file audits and formal evaluative feedback, to inform the development and improvement of services. For example, the analysis of information from return home interviews and the response to 16- and 17-year-old homeless young people.
36. The local authority continues to work hard to recruit a permanent workforce. Where there is staff turnover, the deployment of workers has been carefully considered to minimise disruptions to relationships with children. This action was taken in response to feedback from children. Investment has led to lower caseloads, and has enabled forward thinking planning through 'grow your own', a successful newly qualified social worker programme. Investment has also led to further recruitment in response to a growth in demand. As a result, the local

authority is becoming an employer of choice and the use of agency staff is reducing.

37. Practice improvement is further supported through the implementation of the new electronic recording system. While still in the implementation phase, this new system is starting to support improvements in recording. The preferred model of social work practice is incorporated into the reporting templates, which is providing a strong framework for recording and leading to more consistent good practice. The transition to the new system has been carefully managed. But, this has meant that, at the time of the inspection, the capacity to report on progress and practice was limited and not all services were yet benefiting from the new system.
38. Detailed need analysis supports a strong commissioning framework. Success is evident in the arrangements for responding to early help, children on the edge of care, and mature regional arrangements for securing a range of homes for children and care leavers. A very strong quality assurance approach to placements is resulting in children living in homes that meet their needs, including those children's homes run by the local authority. The lead member for children's services actively leads on the regional adoption arrangements and the regional child sexual exploitation strategy. This places the local authority in a strong position in the region. The successful marketing and recruitment approach to fostering and adoption is increasing the range of in-house provision.