



**10 October 2022**

**Agenda Item:4**

## **REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR, HELP, CARE AND PROTECTION**

### **OFSTED FOCUSED VISIT – OUTCOME AND RESPONSE**

#### **Purpose of the Report**

1. To advise Children and Young People's Select Committee of the outcome from OFSTED's focused visit in June 2022 and Children and Family Services' resulting improvement planning.

#### **Information**

##### **Background**

2. OFSTED conducted a focused visit to Nottinghamshire County Council's children's services on 26 and 27 April 2022. Focused visits use the Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) Framework but are focused on particular areas of the Framework, which can be particular services or particular cohorts. Focused visits do not have a graded outcome. The focused visit on this occasion was to look at arrangements for children in need or subject to a child protection plan.
3. Focused visits are shorter and significantly less in-depth than full inspections. The last full inspection of Nottinghamshire's children's service was October 2019. Focused visits are a monitoring mechanism for assurance between full inspections that complements an Annual Conversation with OFSTED. An Annual Conversation is an engagement meeting between the local authority and OSFTED regional representatives to review the local authority's self-evaluation and to reflect on what is happening in the local authority and inform how they would engage with each other in future.
4. The summary of findings for Nottinghamshire's focused visit was published at the beginning of June 2022 and is attached as **Appendix A** – Focused Visit Letter.

Key headline strengths from the Letter are:

- a) Strong leadership with priority given to protecting and helping children at risk or in need
- b) Maintaining, and in some cases improving, the quality of services despite the challenges of COVID-19

- c) Supporting children at the right level of need and creating strong relationships through regular and frequent visits
- d) Using Public Law Outline pre-proceedings appropriately with thorough management oversight
- e) Effective specialist support by the Family Service.
- f) Parents describing social workers' support as 'above and beyond'
- g) The stability of the workforce that is supported by an extensive range of development opportunities, regular supervision, manageable caseloads and arrangements that maximise time to spend with children and families
- h) A range of activity is helping to address the challenge of recruiting and retaining social workers.

In addition, improvements noted since the last full ILACS inspection (October 2019) include:

- a) Improvements in the effectiveness and attendance at strategy meetings, and
- b) Partners reporting improved communications with children's services with confidence their views are listened to and that they can challenge decisions when required.

5. There were three headline improvement areas noted:

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

As further detail to (a) and (c), several improvement areas relating to a consistently effective quality of service are in the main body of the Letter:

- a) Visits not always being purposeful
- b) The focus of work sometimes being too much on adults rather than children
- c) There is not always evidence of direct work
- d) Case direction at allocation and supervision is not always sufficiently focused, time bound or detailed
- e) The quality of plans is varied with some lacking precision and a child focus
- f) Complex case panel recommendations are not always swiftly used
- g) Involving extended family is variable
- h) Support for disabled children is inconsistent.

## **Improvement Plan**

6. Children and Family Services annually refresh an improvement plan for services that fall under the remit of ILACS. The annual process is to produce a self-evaluation against the OFSTED ILACS framework that outlines the impact of improvement actions undertaken, current strengths, areas of challenge and resulting priorities for service improvement. The self-evaluation is then used in an Annual Conversation with OFSTED as part of their regulatory assurance processes. The usual cycle is to produce a self-evaluation document for November to meet an Annual Conversation date over winter.

7. Children and Family Services are currently collating the self-evaluation document and aligned improvement plan. The findings from this OFSTED visit are being incorporated into the wider self-evaluation process and improvement planning. The improvement plan referred to in this document is therefore only an outline of the response to the focused visit and not the whole improvement plan which is being collated for November 2022. However, the timing of the focused visit does provide assurance on the Department's priorities and direction of travel as a mid-point of the planning year.
8. **Appendix B** outlines the improvement actions being undertaken that reflects OFSTED's findings. The primary actions were largely already in train and therefore progress-to-date is also highlighted. The main actions are:
  - a) The further development and implementation of Strengths-Based Practice Standards
  - b) The development and implementation of a refreshed Learning and Improvement Framework that includes the schedule for case file audits
  - c) The implementation of revised standards for supervision and management oversight.

### **Strengths-Based Practice Standards**

9. Whilst progress has been made over the last two years in the implementation of strengths-based practice in Nottinghamshire, developing a revised set of Practice Standards is seen as a key step in further driving forwards consistently good practice. The standards are currently in draft but due for publication in October. The coverage of the standards addresses direct work, purposefulness, child-focus, family networks and the quality of plans. A plan for introducing and embedding the standards is being finalised and will include learning sets and the launch of a direct work toolkit.
10. The main objectives of refreshing Strengths-Based Practice Standards are:
  - a) To set out the minimum expectations of good social work practice in a comprehensive and easily referenced format
  - b) To consistently refer to these standards so that it becomes the common language and reference point for practice and the development of practice, thereby addressing issues of inconsistency
  - c) To strengthen the identity of social work practice in the Council by highlighting our priorities and building on strengths-based practice.
11. The impact on practice, and on the experience of children and families, of introducing the revised Practice Standards should be seen in quality assurance activities, including case file audits. In particular, we will be looking for evidence of improving the consistency of practice.

### **Learning and Improvement Framework**

12. A refreshed Learning and Improvement Framework is currently in development for publication in January 2023. The Framework includes Learning and Improvement Forums which will be used to ensure learning from audits are translating to actions and improvements across all service areas. Learning and Improvement Forums are being trialled from October 2022 with the intention of more formal roll-out from December 2022.

13. The annual schedule for case file audits has been agreed with the intention of completing over 250 audits bi-annually. This will be a mix of routine audits as well as thematic and impact (follow-up) audits. The table below outlines the allocation of audits planned for quarters 3 and 4 of 2022:

<b>Quarter</b>	<b>Theme/subject</b>	<b>No. of Case Files</b>
Quarter 3	Family Service Exit planning	45
	Direct work/tools	60
Quarter 4	Routine collaborative audits	70
	Plans	60
	Independent chairs service	26
<b>Total</b>		<b>261</b>

Additional audits and other quality assurance activity is also planned. When compared to our neighbouring local authorities, our planned number of audits is high.

14. As noted in OFSTED's Letter, the collaborative approach to case auditing in the Council is in its infancy. The quality of audit will therefore improve over time, but to further support improvements, briefings, workshops and moderation exercise have been put into place. Audit quality will remain a focus for discussion as we reflect on each audit cycle.

### **Supervision and Management Oversight**

15. The development of revised standards for supervision and management oversight should improve its quality and consistency. The standards will be supported by:
- a) Publishing a common supervision template with aligned guidance for one-to-one practice supervision
  - b) Providing guidance on the different forms of supervision and their format, such as individual supervision, group reflective supervision and practice observation
  - c) Establishing a common process for management oversight recording within the case recording system
  - d) Using working groups across the County to support practice developments and identify solutions to any further improvements in this area.
16. The strands of work described above were initiated prior to COVID but were refocused to accommodate supporting staff working remotely. Elements like the common template and agreed process for management oversight are intended to address both quality and recording practices. Case file audits will be the primary monitoring mechanism for evaluating the impact of these improvement actions.

### **Other Options Considered**

17. None. Children and Family Services has a responsibility to address the areas for improvement outlined by Ofsted in any inspection activity.

### **Reason/s for Recommendation/s**

18. Improvement planning is part of the department's Learning and Improvement Framework. It informs quality assurance activities and both strategic and operational priorities. Ofsted

findings are a significant driver for improvement plans so are incorporated into actions being undertaken by the department, which are reflected in **Appendix B**.

19. The impact of improvement actions is measured through quality assurance activities, including the review of business intelligence and performance management data. Divisional Leadership Teams and the department's monthly Learning and Improvement Board evaluates the evidence of progress and impact on an ongoing basis, and this is incorporated into the annual self-evaluation undertaken as part of the Ofsted ILACS inspection cycle.

## **RECOMMENDATION/S**

- 1) That Select Committee considers the actions being undertaken to address areas for improvement identified by Ofsted and advise of further assurance required by the Committee.

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### **Constitutional Comments (GMG 12/09/22)**

20. This report falls within the remit of the Committee to consider.

### **Financial Comments (LCD 12/09/22)**

21. There are no direct financial implications arising from the improvement plan.

### **Background Papers and Published Documents**

Except for previously published documents, which will be available elsewhere, the documents listed here will be available for inspection in accordance with Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

None.

### **Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected**

All.

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