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Mr Stephen Walker
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Dear Mr Walker

Focused visit to Leeds City Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Leeds City Council children's services on 30 and 31 January 2018. The inspectors were Nigel Parkes HMI and Kate Malleson HMI.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for the quality of matching, placement and decision-making for children in care, including the quality of planning and the identification and management of risk and vulnerability.

Inspectors also evaluated the effectiveness of performance management, management oversight, supervision, quality assurance and the continuous professional development of the workforce.

Inspectors looked at a range of evidence. They sampled a number of children and young people's cases, spoke to social workers, managers, foster carers and an independent reviewing officers and met with groups of children and young people. They looked at the local authority's performance management and quality assurance information and observed a decision and review panel (DARP).

Overview

Most children are being cared for in stable family placements that meet their needs. Social workers know the children well. Practice is child-centred. Social work assessments reflect the wishes and feelings of children and young people. Children's plans are clear and coherent. There is evidence of a strong focus on achieving

permanence for children and young people. Regular reviews and effective management oversight help to ensure minimum drift or delay in meeting children's needs.

The local authority clearly understands its strengths and areas for development. It takes its corporate parenting responsibilities very seriously. Senior leaders have created an environment in which social work is flourishing. Children, young people and their carers are benefiting from an increasingly stable workforce. The local authority's commitment to continuous improvement is tangible, as evidenced, for example, by the swift and decisive action taken by senior managers in response to recent concerns about the quality of some residential provision.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The way in which information is presented in performance management reports means that they are not always easy to understand. This has the potential to undermine critical challenge and accountability.
- Personal Education Plans are of variable quality. Sometimes delayed, they are not always sufficiently ambitious, specific or measurable. Senior leaders recognise that this has contributed to children in care not making good progress in their learning and are taking appropriate action to address the issue. However, it remains an area for development.

Findings

- Children and young people are in regular contact with their social workers. Social workers take full account of children's hopes and fears, wishes and feelings. The quality of direct work with children is of a high standard. Every effort is made to try to help children to understand and make sense of their life histories. In most cases, the voice of the child in informing and shaping care planning is clear.
- Children's case records are comprehensive and up to date. Assessments are analytical and child-centred. Needs and risks are clearly articulated. Rigorous attention is paid to the needs of individual children and of sibling groups. Children's plans are outcome-focused. Most are specific and measurable. Plans are rigorously and regularly reviewed. This helps to avoid drift or delay.
- The local authority is committed to achieving permanence for children and young people. Family group conferences are systematically used to try to identify family-based solutions. Viability assessments are completed promptly. Comprehensive together or apart assessments inform placement decisions about brothers and sisters. Family time (contact) arrangements are carefully assessed, well managed and regularly reviewed.

- The local authority takes its responsibilities as a corporate parent very seriously. Health, including mental health and emotional well-being, is seen as a priority. Close collaboration with looked after children's nurses is helping to improve the health outcomes of children in care.
- Therapeutic social work support is provided by a specialist team which includes psychologists. This helps to build resilience and prevent placement breakdown. Over 200 children and their foster carers, including kinship carers, are benefiting from this service. The team also provides easy access to child and adolescent mental health services.
- The local authority recognises that 'the majority of children in care are not making expected progress in their learning'. Senior leaders are taking appropriate action to address this issue.
- Social workers make good use of the child sexual exploitation assessment checklist to identify risks. Vulnerability and risk management meetings provide robust oversight. Inspectors saw some very positive examples of simple but effective safety plans.
- Great care is taken in trying to find the right placement for children. Potential matches are carefully considered. Placement plans are comprehensive and detailed. There is good wrap-around support for children and their foster carers, including kinship carers. Most children who are looked after live with families either in Leeds or within 20 miles of their homes. Placement stability is generally good.
- Independent reviewing officers (IROs) provide robust oversight and effective critical challenge. They also know their children well. The vast majority of children's reviews are timely. Most children are able to meet face-to-face with their IROs between reviews. This helps to ensure that children's views are taken fully into account. IROs play a critical role in quality assuring the experiences of children in care, and make good and effective use of formal and informal escalation procedures to resolve any issues or concerns that arise.
- Senior leaders understand what is working well and have identified areas appropriately for further development. There is no sense of complacency. On the contrary, senior leaders routinely challenge themselves, and each other, to do even better. They listen to and act on feedback from children and young people.
- Performance management information is used effectively to understand practice and performance. Trends and patterns are carefully analysed and the

results are used to inform strategic and operational management responses and/or develop imaginative and innovative solutions. However, senior managers recognise that the way in which the information in performance management reports is presented means that it is not readily accessible to a wider audience.

- Together, middle and senior managers present a strong team. They are visible, accessible and active. An appropriate range of gate-keeping and other panels ensure appropriate checks and balances. Decisions taken and actions agreed are clearly recorded on case files. Supervision is regular and reflective.
- The local authority has developed an effective multi-layered approach to quality assurance. This involves good quality supervision, robust management oversight and regular dip sampling by middle and senior managers allied to the creative use of interactive learning audits and the systematic application of quality checklists by IROs after each and every review. As a result, social workers and their managers understand that impact and outcomes are everybody's business. They take pride in what they do.
- The local authority has invested wisely and well in recruitment and retention, workforce development and career progression. Staff turnover is at an all-time low. The reliance on agency staff is negligible. A more stable workforce means that children and young people are able to build meaningful relationships with their social workers.
- The review that the new head of children looked after is about to carry out provides an opportunity to reflect on, and take stock of, the volume and quality of in-house residential care. The review also provides an opportunity for senior managers to reaffirm their commitment to high quality residential care as a vital service for those children and young people who, for whatever reason, are unable to cope with the demands of family-based care.

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

Yours sincerely

Nigel Parkes
Her Majesty's Inspector