

7 October 2016

Ms Frances Craven  
Strategic Director  
Children's Services  
Leicester City Council  
City Hall, Rutland Wing, Floor 3  
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Dear Ms Craven

### **Monitoring visit of Leicester City local authority children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit of Leicester City local authority children's services on 7 and 8 September 2016. This is the second visit under Ofsted's revised monitoring arrangements that came into operation in June 2016. Prior to this, three visits had been undertaken under the previous arrangements, following the inspection of March 2015 when the overall effectiveness of services was judged inadequate. Inspectors found progress in most of the areas identified in the inspection in March 2015 and significant progress in some aspects of work to support children looked after.

### **Areas covered by the visit**

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in services provided by the local authority to support children looked after.

Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, supervision files and notes, performance data and examples of good practice provided by the local authority. In addition, they spoke to a range of staff, including social workers, independent reviewing officers, the child and family principal social worker, team and service managers and senior leaders.

### **Summary of findings**

- The local authority has established a comprehensive performance management system that enables effective scrutiny of data and involves all managers in regular auditing activity. There are weekly performance meetings in both the children looked after (CLA) and children in need (CIN) services that consider data and involve managers in case sampling on a thematic basis. This helps managers to understand both the strengths and the challenges in their respective service areas.

- There is evidence that the workforce is becoming more stable and a range of initiatives are ensuring that the professional development of social workers is well supported from the point of joining the assisted and supported year in employment programme.
- The legacy of workforce instability continues to impact negatively on outcomes for children. Too many children looked after have had numerous changes of social worker and this is contributing to drift and delay in assessments and implementing care plans.
- Supervision of social workers is now taking place on a regular basis. Management oversight of work is improving but social workers are not given sufficient opportunities to reflect and analyse their casework practice.
- Caseloads have reduced, with an average of 18 children allocated to social workers in the CIN teams and 20 in the CLA teams. There are currently no children looked after cases unallocated.
- The recent establishment of the single assessment service aims to improve service quality and reduce the demands made of the CIN teams. Senior managers are encouraged by the early operation of this service and confident that it will lead to service improvement. However, at the time of this visit it was too early for inspectors to evaluate the impact on outcomes for children.
- The working environment for social workers has much improved, with more modern office accommodation. Co-location is providing the opportunity for stronger collaborative working between professionals and between service areas.
- Children looked after are regularly visited by their social worker. Children are seen on their own and direct work is being undertaken to ensure that their views are secured and taken into account.
- Care plans are usually updated after the statutory review. However, the quality is variable and some are not informed by an up-to-date assessment. They do not always reference other plans, such as those supporting children's educational or health development.
- The quality of permanence planning is too variable and often quite poor, particularly in the initial stages of a case. There is no robust system in place to ensure that timely permanence plans are established and delivered. This is leading to unacceptable delays in securing permanent homes for some children. Some children remain in foster placements when adoption or a special guardianship order might better meet their needs.

- Considerable progress has been made in ensuring that initial health assessments are undertaken within timescale, with 78% completed within 28 days of placement in the 12 months preceding July 2016. This is a significant improvement on previous performance. When children are placed in another health authority area, proactive attempts are made to ensure that the health assessment is undertaken within this timescale.
- Personal education plans (PEPs) are mostly up to date and the quality assurance provided by the virtual school is helping to ensure that they are appropriate and that the pupil premium is used effectively to support achievement.
- Where children are subject to a rehabilitation plan some are still not well supported following their return home.
- The capacity of the independent reviewing officer (IRO) service has been strengthened and although there has been a significant increase in the numbers of children looked after since the last inspection, caseloads have reduced.
- Too many foster carer reviews are not completed within timescale or chaired independently. The local authority has agreed plans to establish a new post to address this shortfall.
- The electronic social care record (ESCR) has been further developed to ensure accuracy of data, provide performance management tools for frontline managers and support good recording practice by social workers. Most case file records seen were up to date.
- The assistant director now chairs the family justice board and meets regularly with the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) manager. This is assisting joint working to improve the quality of court work. The appointment of a case progression manager aims to ensure that pre-proceedings and court work are both tracked for timeliness and quality assured. This development is too recent to evaluate for impact.
- Change is being effectively managed. The workforce has been consulted about service improvements and practitioners and managers expressed their confidence in the senior management team.
- The examples of good practice examples provided by the local authority offered evidence of children living in the right placement and achieving positive outcomes but, even in these examples, children had not always received a consistently good service.

## **Evaluation of progress**

The 2015 single inspection identified areas requiring improvement for all children. These included the need for the local authority to:

- put into place an effective performance management framework
- ensure that all staff receive regular reflective supervision
- improve the continuity of social worker for children and ensure the timeliness and consistency of social work visits
- ensure the local authority's engagement with Cafcass and the family court and improve the quality of pre-proceedings and court work
- ensure that the ESCR promotes good practice, supports managerial oversight and provides accurate performance information
- improve the timeliness of social work interventions and ensure effective permanence planning within the child's timescales
- ensure that when a child goes missing from care, a return visit takes place promptly, the outcome is recorded and that it informs the child's plan and local intelligence gathering.

The 2015 inspection also highlighted specific areas requiring improvement for children looked after. These included the need for the local authority to:

- ensure that care plans are informed by regular and up-to-date assessments of needs
- ensure that initial health assessments take place with 28 days of reception into care
- improve the consistency and quality of personal education plans as a tool to improve the educational achievements of CLA
- ensure that effective re-unification plans are agreed by a statutory review and that these arrangements are monitored following the child's return home
- strengthen the capacity of the IRO service to fulfil all aspects of the IRO handbook
- improve the timeliness and quality of foster carer reviews and strengthen the level of independent oversight.

This visit found progress in most of these areas and significant progress in some. A permanent and highly committed senior management team has now been established and has further increased the pace of change. There are encouraging early signs from some more recent planned improvements, although overall it is too early to evaluate their impact. Despite these improvements, however, the quality of casework still requires significant improvement. A critical factor remains the lack of continuity and consistency of social work support, which means that too many children are not yet receiving a good enough service and as a result experience poor outcomes.

Improvements to the size of social worker caseloads and to the certainty and quality of supervision, alongside considerable professional development opportunities, are beginning to bear fruit and there are early signs that the workforce is stabilising. Children are seen regularly by their social workers, who seek their views. Most children have up-to-date health assessments and adequate PEPs. There is increased IRO capacity to ensure that care plans are in place and delivered effectively.

The progress found on this visit can be directly related to the steps that managers have taken to improve systems, structure and service delivery. The focus has been on ensuring compliance with basic service standards and this is largely now being achieved. Managers are now rightly putting an increased emphasis on quality assurance processes. Change is being carefully and purposely managed. The impact of this focused management activity was evident during this monitoring visit.

To achieve good quality support and better outcomes, managers need to continue to prioritise workforce development in order to achieve stability, consistently manageable caseloads and the right skill mix. This should include establishing opportunities for reflective supervision.

To improve the quality of support for children looked after, there needs to be a focus on improving the quality of care plans, informed by up-to-date assessments and establishing robust processes that support timely permanence planning. Ensuring support so that reunification plans are delivered effectively continues to be an area requiring more work.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Carolyn Spray  
Her Majesty's Inspector