

13 June 2017

Ms Frances Craven
Strategic Director, Children's Services
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Dear Ms Craven

Monitoring visit to Leicester City Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Leicester City Council children's services on 26 and 27 April 2017. The visit was the fourth monitoring visit under Ofsted's revised monitoring arrangements, which came into operation in June 2016. Prior to this date, three visits were completed under the previous arrangements following the inspection of March 2015, when the overall effectiveness of the service was judged to be inadequate. The inspectors on this monitoring visit were Julie Knight HMI and Dawn Godfrey HMI. This visit found that the local authority has made steady progress in improving the quality of pre-proceedings and court work.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in care planning for children, with a particular focus on the quality and timeliness of children within the Public Law Outline process, including pre-proceedings and care proceedings.

Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, children's case file audits, performance data and examples of good practice provided by the local authority. In addition, they spoke to a range of staff, including social workers, team and service managers and senior leaders, legal services and Cafcass.

Summary of findings

- The local authority continues to make steady progress in improving both the consistency and quality of services experienced by children. Recent cases show consistent improvement when compared with more historical practice, although there remains work to do to ensure that most children receive a good service.

- Performance management and quality assurance are increasingly effective. They include the development of a range of trackers to monitor children's journeys through the Public Law Outline process. These trackers are giving senior and frontline managers improved oversight of operational practice.
- Some children have experienced delay in their plans due to historical drift, including missed opportunities to intervene in their lives earlier and delayed assessments. Recent improvement in progressing children's plans in quicker timescales is visible for the vast majority of children in need of Public Law Outline intervention.
- Timely assessments and intervention to protect unborn babies demonstrate the effectiveness of a pre-birth tracking tool. This results in clear parallel planning and options to identify best outcomes and permanence for children. For a small number of children, this also includes an appropriate recommendation of pursuing fostering to adoption.
- Decisions to hold legal planning meetings for children in need of intervention, from pre-proceedings agreements and care order applications, are appropriate. Pre-proceedings letters clearly outline to parents the local authority's concerns, services available and what needs to happen next. Letters would be strengthened by using plain English to ensure that parents really understand what this means for their child. Good examples were seen of legal documentation being translated into a family's first language.
- Recording of the outcome of pre-proceedings meetings in children's records does not always include the rationale for decisions to extend pre-proceedings agreements, or the decision-making process in legal planning meetings. This impacts on the ability to fully understand the child's journey"
- Social workers provide analytical evidence and information to the court. Furthermore they appropriately use children's history and family background to inform the assessment to identify these children's needs. The vast majority of initial viability assessments are completed in good time and include all relevant information to help the court make decisions on children's current and future care needs.
- Social workers helping children through the Public Law Outline process have challenging and complex caseloads. In some cases, the size of caseloads is hampering their ability to spend enough time with children to fully understand their individual needs, particularly those children living in larger sibling groups.
- The implementation of a workforce strategy is beginning to be effective. However, although improving the workforce is not yet sufficiently stable, and challenges to reduce staff turnover remain. This means some children still have too many changes in social worker. This continues to make it difficult for them to

build effective and consistent trusting relationships. It is, however, encouraging that all team manager posts within the service have been filled with permanent appointments.

- The vast majority of social workers receive regular supervision. When managers use supervision effectively, with focused specific actions and challenge, children's plans move forward quickly. This is not consistent for all workers, leading to drift and delay for some children in achieving permanence. Implementation of a new reflective supervision tool, developed jointly with De Montfort University and launched in April 2017, is in use for a few children. Staff feedback on the new tool is positive, but it is too soon to establish what difference this will make to children's lives.
- Children looked after by the local authority during the court process do not always benefit from intervention and oversight of an independent reviewing officer. Challenge to delays in care planning, and escalation to senior managers to prevent drift in children's timescales, is evident only recently for some children and is inconsistent.
- The appointment of a case progression manager in July 2016, and improved accuracy of data on children's care planning in the previous six months, gives managers improved sight of children's journeys through pre-proceedings and the family court process. They are therefore better placed to identify and combat potential drift.
- Engagement with Cafcass and the family courts is improving. The local authority divisional director chairs the Local Family Justice Board (LFJB), and senior managers are fully involved in the work of the LFJB performance sub-group. Cafcass is represented on the local authority's improvement board. This engagement is helping partners to work together to improve outcomes for children within the family court process.
- Audit activity helps senior managers to identify key areas of strength and improvement still required in the quality of services provided to children within the care planning process.

Evaluation of progress

Evidence from this monitoring visit demonstrates that the local authority has made steady progress in the management and quality of its pre-proceedings and court work. A stable and energetic senior management team holds a shared vision and commitment to improvement, demonstrated in the development of an increasingly effective performance management and quality assurance framework. This is enabling managers to have effective oversight of children's progression from the beginning of care planning through to achieving permanence.

The case progression manager has improved management oversight of tracking tools and the analysis of trends which enhances managers' understanding of the impact of services on children's experiences. This, coupled with the increased engagement with family courts and Cafcass, ensures that senior managers hold a better grip on knowing how quickly children's plans progress in the Public Law Outline process.

A continued legacy of staff turnover and a workforce that is not yet stable means that some children still have too many changes in social worker. Though gradually improving, this has a negative impact on children's opportunities to build significant and trusting relationships with their social workers, and it leads to unacceptable delays in care planning and achieving permanence for some children. The complexity of circumstances in children's lives and the size of some social work caseloads compounds this, and reduces opportunities for social workers to spend good-quality time with children in order to understand their lives.

Management oversight in supervision is regular but needs to be more consistently productive in driving forward children's plans. The oversight of children's journeys by the independent reviewing officers must be stronger and visibly effective in advocating for children to achieve better outcomes.

Initiation of legal and care proceedings processes for children needing Public Law Outline intervention is improving. Recent progress in timescales for completion of viability and pre-birth assessments demonstrates that managers identify children's risks and needs more quickly than at the time of the inspection, including beginning assessments at the pre-proceedings stage, early in children's journeys, and using parallel planning to achieve better outcomes for some children.

Not all children have benefited from the recent improvements made within the local authority. The authority is not achieving timely permanence for some children, especially those who have remained within the family court process for too long due to historical drift and those where opportunities to intervene in their lives sooner were missed. There needs to be greater consistency in the quality of assessment and care planning for some children, particularly those living within large sibling groups.

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

Yours sincerely

Julie Knight
Her Majesty's Inspector