

16 November 2016

Mr Michael Rosen
Executive Director of Children's Services
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Dear Mr Rosen

Monitoring visit to Norfolk local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Norfolk County Council children's services on 17 and 18 October 2016. This was the second monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in October 2015. The inspectors were Nigel Parkes, Fiona Parker and Kath Townsley.

While there has been positive movement in some areas of children's services, the overall pace of change is slow. Leaders have not been ruthless enough in pursuing improvement at all levels. Difficulties recruiting high calibre managers and staff, and poorly developed strategic planning and performance management, have hindered the authority's efforts to transform services. As a result, children and young people are still not consistently receiving good enough services.

Areas covered by the visit

In the course of this monitoring visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the areas of:

- initial contact, referral and assessment arrangements, with a particular focus on the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH), the effectiveness of strategy meetings and s47 enquiries, and the response to children who go missing from home or care and/or are at risk of child sexual exploitation
- children looked after, with a particular focus on permanency planning, including the effectiveness of legal planning meetings and the independent reviewing service, and the timeliness of health assessments
- care leavers, with a particular focus on the effectiveness of arrangements for keeping in touch with care leavers, the quality of pathway plans, employment, education and training and the use of health passports
- leadership, management and governance, with a particular focus on strategic management and leadership and the effective use of performance management information.

During the monitoring visit, inspectors tracked and sampled a number of children's and young people's cases. They also considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, minutes of meetings, management reports, tracking tools, case audits and improvement plans, as well as other information provided by managers and staff. In addition, inspectors spoke to several young people and their foster carers, as well as social workers, managers and representatives from partner agencies. They also observed several meetings, including a legal planning meeting and a meeting of the children's services committee.

Summary of findings

- The local authority is taking suitable action to address the concern that thresholds for access to children's social care services are not always well understood, or consistently applied. Further work is required to increase partners' awareness of, and build their confidence in, early help services across all six localities.
- The initial response to child protection issues and concerns is robust in the work that inspectors sampled. Children and young people are being seen with sufficient priority and in most cases their wishes and feelings are well recorded. Inspectors found evidence of increased management oversight across all services.
- The response to children who go missing and/or are at risk of being, or have been, sexually exploited has been strengthened and effective arrangements are in place to monitor and manage risks. However, the intelligence available is not used well enough to develop a clear picture of trends and patterns in each of the six localities.
- The timeliness of social work assessments has improved, but further progress is required to improve the quality and consistency of assessments and plans, including pathway plans.
- With a greater focus on permanence for children looked after, the local authority is increasing its use of 'together or apart assessments' and 'foster to adopt' arrangements. However, the quality of critical challenge provided by independent reviewing officers is still not consistently robust or effective. In addition, the arrangements for tracking the progress of permanency plans are not sufficiently robust. As a result, some children and young people experience drift and delay in achieving permanency.
- The local authority is now in touch with 95% of its care leavers, and the care leavers' service, which was established 13 months ago, is starting to deliver improved outcomes. However, there needs to be a more rigorous and systematic approach to ensuring that care leavers are helped to develop independent living

skills. In addition, the local authority has not done enough to understand or analyse the needs of and support required for older care leavers who are not in education, employment or training.

- The local authority acknowledges that the quality of leadership and management, and by extension, practice and performance, varies considerably between different localities.
- Senior managers have not until now been sufficiently strategic in their approach to transforming the way that the authority operates. The absence of robust service and business plans and the under-development of performance management have hampered progress.
- Children and young people are still not consistently receiving a good enough service. The local authority is not sufficiently ruthless or ambitious in tracking and chasing progress at individual case, operational service and strategic management levels.

Evaluation of progress

The quality of information and level of detail provided by partner agencies in the contact and referral forms are too variable. In a small number of cases seen by inspectors, the thresholds for access to social care services had not been applied effectively. A significant issue here has been a continuing difficulty in recruiting and retaining a group of suitably qualified and experienced assistant team managers within the MASH who are responsible for making threshold decisions. Recognising this, the local authority has strengthened the management arrangements by seconding an experienced manager to a new head of social work and partnerships post based in the MASH. It is too soon to see the impact of this appointment.

Schools are identifying and reporting child protection issues and concerns appropriately. Strategy discussions and meetings are effective in sharing information and assessing the level or risk, resulting in robust decisions, clear action plans and timely child protection investigations. The vast majority of initial child protection conferences are held within 15 days after the last strategy discussion, as required.

Social workers have many ways of successfully helping children and young people explore their hopes and fears, thoughts and feelings. The views of children and young people are well reflected in assessments and plans. However, social workers' judgements are not sharp enough. Some are too quick to accept at face value what children or adults say and their analysis is not sophisticated enough in weighing the child or young person's wishes and feelings against all of the other information gathered during the course of an assessment. In two of the six cases tracked by inspectors, a lack of professional curiosity resulted in social work interventions which were incomplete or ineffective.

Most social workers receive regular, task-focused supervision. However, while there is increasing evidence of management oversight, including, for example, in electronic case records, supervisors are not consistently setting clear priorities and timescales in order to drive progress.

A significant amount of information is generated about the offer and completion of return home interviews when children go missing from home or care and the number of children and young people at risk of child sexual exploitation. However, although it is possible to identify overarching patterns and trends, the way that the information is collated means that it is not yet possible to develop an accurate picture of what is happening in each locality.

Managers have taken appropriate action to address the problem of unrealistically high caseloads in assessment teams one and two in Norwich. This had contributed to a backlog of 70 assessments awaiting completion or sign off. While the majority of children's assessments are now completed within the timescales expected by the local authority, there is still work to do to sustain this improvement.

The quality of children's assessments is mixed. Inspectors saw examples of some very good assessments, but at least half of those sampled are overly descriptive and/or are not sufficiently thought through. In the worst examples, social workers are over-reliant on what parents and others have said, rather than exercising their own professional judgement to determine what is really going on. It is also apparent that social workers are not routinely reviewing or updating their assessments in response to changing circumstances.

The quality of children's care plans is mixed. It is not always clear whether, or when, plans have been updated, and approximately half are not specific enough to measure the effectiveness of the actions taken. This has the potential to delay important actions that need to take place.

Almost all care leavers now have a needs analysis and pathway plan, although the local authority's own audits demonstrate that the quality of pathway plans is still too variable. In some cases, needs assessments are absent or have not been updated in response to significant life changes. In others, the young person's voice is not readily apparent and a lack of professional curiosity means that no attempt has been made to understand the link between the issues that the young person is dealing with and past events in their lives. Young people's emotional well-being and mental health needs are not taken into account fully by their personal assistants.

Having completed an extensive 'stock take' of children looked after, the local authority's permanence monitoring group has accurately identified those children for whom assessments, decisions and plans are required in order to achieve permanence. However, the local authority is not systematically tracking children's progress well enough, particularly in the case of newly accommodated children and those who are experiencing delay. As a result, there is a risk that children are being

looked after for longer than is necessary. In one case, the link report on the child's foster carers, which was due to have been completed by mid-July, has still not been signed off and the case was still waiting to go to the fostering panel.

In the year to date, the local authority made seven foster to adopt placements, as many as it made in the whole of last year. Some progress has also been made in the use of together and apart assessments, but these are still not routinely used as and when they are appropriate.

Although the average size of independent reviewing officers' (IROs) caseloads (65 cases) has reduced to within nationally recommended levels, IROs are not consistently providing effective critical challenge or using their influence well enough to prevent drift and delay for all children. The quality of reviews and of the written recommendations arising from them are not always sufficiently clear or robust. This means that, on occasion, the opportunity to drive progress is missed.

Legal planning meetings (LPMs) are being used to review the situation of every child who is accommodated long term under section 20, and appropriate advice is being sought on individual cases. Most are clear, well-structured and carefully review the evidence to see whether the threshold for proceedings is met. This results in coherent advice, which unambiguously sets out the rationale for issuing proceedings. However, inspectors also saw evidence of lengthy delays between meetings taking place, minutes being circulated and advice being issued. The fact that LPM minutes and decisions are not routinely uploaded to children's electronic case records is also a weakness, making it difficult for children or young people to understand key decisions in their lives, now or at some point in the future.

An improved focus on care leavers by leaders and staff at all levels, from the lead member to operational teams, has resulted in significant additional investment and manageable caseloads. In addition, a qualified social worker works alongside personal assistants in every care leaver team. The local authority is also in the process of increasing the service's management capacity by appointing a senior social worker in each team. As a result, the service that care leavers receive has improved. The local authority is in touch with 95% of its care leavers and 80% of care leavers are seen face-to-face at least once every two months. The proportion of care leavers living in suitable accommodation (89.5%) has increased; 64 care leavers (14%) are being supported to continue to live with their former foster carers as part of a Staying Put arrangement. Foster carers involved in Staying Put describe the support provided, by personal assistants and social workers, as much improved.

The proportion of care leavers in education, employment or training has increased since the previous inspection, up from 42% to 58%, and is now above the national average. Increasing numbers of care leavers are moving into higher education; over 50 of care leavers (11%) are doing university courses, compared to a national average of 6%. However, too many care leavers are employed on part-time or zero-hour contracts with no training opportunities. The local authority still does not have a

clear enough picture of those 18- and 19-year-old care leavers who are NEET and it does not know how many care leavers are engaged in apprenticeships. Prompt action is required to address this significant gap in oversight of care leavers' experience.

Support for care leavers' health needs is not well developed, particularly for those with mental health needs. The recent introduction of health passports was targeted primarily at older children looked after and eligible care leavers, and consequently very few care leavers aged over 18 have one. However, inspectors found that care leavers generally have a good understanding of their health histories.

Systems and processes have been strengthened in order to better support the transition of care leavers towards independence. The transitions group, which meets every week to review individual cases, and is usually attended by the young person and their key worker, focuses well on, among other things, accommodation options. However, young people are not being supported in a systematic way to develop the most important skills for independence, nor is the achievement of those skills being monitored effectively.

In an attempt to raise standards and promote greater consistency across the county, the local authority has established a number of service development groups. There are groups for child protection, assessment, children looked after and care leavers. However, it is evident from the local authority's own data that there are significant variations in performance between the council's six localities. This is because the authority is not using potentially invaluable information about contacts and referrals, the most common issues and concerns and/or interventions and outcomes to develop a useful picture of demand and performance across the county. Without that level of understanding, it is difficult for the local authority to respond effectively to the different needs of different localities.

Under-investment in performance management information means that senior managers responsible for managing a multi-million pound service do not have the information they need to do their job effectively. Although reports contain a substantial amount of data, it is not possible to identify patterns and trends. This undermines transparency and makes it extremely difficult for senior managers and leaders to hold their managers and staff or each other properly to account. A new set of performance management reports is about to be piloted.

Senior managers and leaders are also failing to make systematic use of service and business plans. As a result, they do not identify precisely enough who needs to do what by when. This is not to deny that middle and senior managers have been extremely busy. But, by concentrating on the operational delivery at the expense of strategic development, and by not adopting a whole-systems approach to the changes needed, the local authority is not yet getting maximum impact for its effort. Children and young people are still not consistently receiving a good service.

In some areas of the service, the authority does not know how well it is, or is not, doing for children. For example, although a joint protocol between housing and children's social care ensures that 16- and 17-year-olds who present themselves as homeless receive a joint assessment, the local authority does not record or collate information about the number of joint assessments completed or their outcome. In other areas of its work, the local authority is well aware of its performance but it is simply not strenuous enough in its efforts to improve performance. For example, despite all the time and effort that has been invested in improving the timeliness of initial health assessments for children looked after, between December 2015 and October 2016 the percentage of referrals made to health within five working days of a child coming into care was only 61%. As a result, during the same period, only 47% of children had an initial assessment within 20 working days. This is not good enough to meet children's needs.

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

Yours sincerely

Nigel Parkes HMI
East of England

cc Eleanor Schooling, National Director Social Care
Dora East, Department for Education, Interventions Unit Child Protection and LA
Performance