

6 July 2017

Matt Dunkley
Executive Director of Children's Services
County Hall
Martineau Lane
Norwich
NR1 2DH

Dear Mr Dunkley

Monitoring visit to Norfolk County Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Norfolk County Council children's services on 6 and 7 June 2017. This was the fourth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in October 2015. The inspectors were Nigel Parkes, Fiona Parker and Kath Townsley.

The local authority is making steady progress in improving services, in most areas, for children and young people.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, which, by agreement with the local authority, was centred on Kings Lynn, inspectors reviewed the progress made in addressing the weaknesses identified at the 2015 inspection, in the areas of:

- leadership and management, with a particular focus on the impact of leadership and management on frontline practice and the pace of change
- children looked after, with a particular focus on the voice of the child and the effectiveness of planning for permanence with children and young people
- care leavers, with a particular focus on the effectiveness of the support given to young people to help them plan and prepare for independence, find suitable accommodation and engage in meaningful education, employment or training
- help and protection, with a particular focus on the identification, management and reduction of risks, and the effectiveness of arrangements for stepping cases up or down between early help and children's social care services.

During the monitoring visit, inspectors tracked and sampled a number of children's and young people's cases, all from the Kings Lynn area. As well as speaking to social workers, managers, personal advisers and early help practitioners, inspectors considered a range of evidence from across the county, including electronic case

records, minutes of meetings, management reports, tracking tools, case audits and improvement plans.

Overview

The new leadership team has maintained its momentum and is driving change with a real sense of urgency. Senior managers are making systematic use of audits and performance management information to drive improvement. Middle and senior managers are active and visible. Frontline managers and staff understand the key priorities and support the direction of travel. The level of reliance on agency staff is reducing. Morale is good. However, the level of critical challenge which independent reviewing officers (IROs) and child protection officers provide is not consistently strong or effective.

The quality of assessments is improving. Plans are more purposeful. There is now a clear focus on permanence planning. The increasing stability of the workforce is making it easier for social workers to develop meaningful relationships with children and young people. Their views are being listened to. However, there is room for improvement in the way in which social workers explore issues of culture and identity and help children to understand their life and care histories.

The local authority is in touch with the vast majority of its care leavers. The proportion of care leavers who are engaged in employment, education or training (EET) has risen. However, formal planning for leaving care starts too late. Although every care leaver has a pathway plan, too many pathway plans, and the assessments on which they are based, lack depth and/or robust analysis. The help and support that care leavers receive is still not good enough.

Senior managers are taking appropriate action to ensure that thresholds for access to children's social care services are well understood and consistently applied. Inspectors have seen examples of robust and effective responses to child sexual exploitation, with risks being identified clearly, managed effectively and systematically reduced. Early help practitioners, and their managers, know how and when to step cases up from early help to children's social care. The local authority is taking action to strengthen its response to children who go missing from home or care.

Findings and evaluation of progress

1. Impact of leadership and management

Taking full advantage of the investment agreed by elected members to strengthen children's social care services, the new senior management team has maintained its momentum in driving improvement. There is a much greater sense of urgency than there was nine months ago.

A new and slimmer improvement plan provides a clear sense of purpose and direction, reflecting a systematic approach to change management. The improvement plan includes an appropriate balance of short- and medium-term objectives. It is specific and measurable, identifies ambitious but realistic targets and is easy to read. Managers and staff understand, and are engaged with, the direction of travel. Most appear to welcome the increase in critical challenge and accountability.

The quality of performance management information available to managers and staff has improved significantly. The county performance report now includes clear, concise and appropriately self-critical commentary. Audits and performance data are being used effectively to highlight shortfalls in practice and/or performance. Variations in performance between teams, localities or service areas are identified and addressed. The still relatively new locality performance challenge workshops are proving to be popular with managers.

By creating more, smaller social work teams, leaders are in the process of strengthening management oversight and increasing support for staff by reducing supervisory ratios. The focus is on quality. The success of the Norfolk Institute for Practice Excellence has had a major impact on the stability of the workforce. In Kings Lynn, the level of dependence on agency staff has been significantly reduced. Caseloads are more manageable. Morale is good.

There is still a considerable way to go. More children, young people and families now receive a good service, but they are still in the minority. While pleased with the progress that has been made in the last six months, senior managers and leaders are under no illusions about the scale of the task. The single biggest challenge facing them and their staff is to achieve consistency. Importantly, senior managers know what is, and is not, working well and are taking appropriate and well-targeted action to deliver better outcomes for children, young people and families.

2. Children looked after

The drive to achieve permanence for every child or young person in care has gained pace. Social workers clearly understand the significance and importance of early permanence and parallel planning. More robust and effective monitoring arrangements are helping to minimise delay. Consistency is still a challenge, but inspectors saw some good examples of permanence being achieved quickly for children.

Children and young people who have been living with their carers for a long time are having their placements confirmed as long-term foster placements, when this is in their best interests. The number of children who have achieved permanence by way of a special guardianship order has also increased, partly as a result of the work done by the local authority to address foster carers' concerns about the level and

availability of financial, and other, support. More children and young people are now able to enjoy the security and emotional stability that permanence provides.

The quality of children's assessments and care plans is improving. As a result, social work activity is more focused and purposeful. The child's voice is more clearly evident in assessments, care plans and case records, although social workers do not always give due consideration to issues of culture and identity. Additionally, although inspectors saw some positive examples of life-story books, children do not always get the help they need soon enough to understand and make sense of their life, and care, histories.

Children and young people are starting to benefit from the consistency that a more settled and stable workforce provides. Social workers know children well and are clearly committed to building and maintaining meaningful relationships with them. Children and young people are at the centre of the care planning process. However, independent reviewing officers are not yet consistently providing the right level of critical challenge and scrutiny. Senior managers are taking appropriate action to address this, for example by increasing the number of substantive IRO posts and being very clear about the standard of performance that is required and expected.

The proportion of children looked after across the county who benefit from advocacy support has increased from 3% to 12%. However, the number of children with an advocate or independent visitor is still far too low.

3. Care leavers

The care leavers service is now well established. The county council has taken action to improve access to apprenticeships by applying for training agency status. Plans to establish a 14 to 25 transitions team in order to smooth the pathway into adult services are well advanced. However, some care leavers continue to experience difficulties in accessing support from adult services, especially those care leavers who have a learning disability who have not previously been involved with the children with disabilities team.

Formal planning for leaving care starts too late, as evidenced by the fact that co-working between young people's personal advisers and social workers does not begin until the young person has reached the age of 17. This does not give young people enough time to make well-informed decisions about their future, or for the support provided, to help them address complex life issues, to be effective.

Personal advisers know their young people well and are clearly committed to improving their life chances, but the work that they do is not always purposeful or appropriately focused. Too many assessments and plans are superficial. While assessments identify most of the issues and challenges that young people face, in many cases a lack of robust analysis dilutes the impact of the help and support young people receive. On occasion there is only a cursory reference to major life

events, without any serious exploration of the impact on the young person or what this means for their current and future support needs.

Every care leaver has a pathway plan, but generally pathway plans are not sufficiently ambitious or aspirational. Too many pathway plans are judged by internal audits to be inadequate, particularly in relation to the assessment of risk. Care leavers' pathway needs assessments are being systematically reviewed but so far, in Kings Lynn, fewer than half have been updated.

Personal advisers are not always effective in mobilising the support required to make a real difference in young people's lives. Access to specialist advice, for example on housing, employment and welfare benefits, is available but it is limited by geography and time constraints. Currently there are very few opportunities to share knowledge, experience and examples of best practice between care leavers teams, and across the care leavers service, in Norfolk.

The 'progress to independence', introduced since the last monitoring visit, is designed to encourage and support children looked after, and care leavers to develop independent living skills. It is too soon to evaluate its impact, although inspectors noted that the local authority does not yet have a robust implementation strategy. For example, while foster carers who continue to care for a care leaver as part of a Staying Put arrangement have been briefed on the tool, they have not had any training on how to facilitate and promote independence.

The number of children looked after and care leavers who are engaged in employment, education or training has increased significantly and is now above the national average. Performance data, which is detailed and reliable, is carefully analysed by managers, taking into account others factors, including age, locality and accommodation status. A new, monthly EET newsletter provides up-to-date information about new services and opportunities, as well as financial support for young people. However, more still needs to be done to raise the educational and career aspirations of young people.

4. Help and protection

Senior managers are taking appropriate action to ensure that thresholds for access to social care services are well understood and consistently applied. They and their partners are reviewing the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) and they have appointed a team manager to lead the new early-help hub, which will be based in the MASH. The local safeguarding children board has approved the local authority's proposal to adopt the pan-London threshold document, which has been adapted to make it fit for the local purpose. The new descriptors have already been published and are due to be launched very shortly.

The impact of the approved social work model, which is helping social workers to clarify their thinking about issues and concerns, acknowledge protective factors and

agree what action needs to be taken, is readily apparent. Social workers are able to identify and clearly articulate risks with increasing confidence, but child protection plans are not consistently specific or measurable. This has the potential to diffuse the impact and effectiveness of action taken to safeguard and protect children and young people. Currently, some of the safety goals set by child protection conference chairs lack specificity and are unhelpfully broad.

Inspectors have seen examples of robust and effective responses to child sexual exploitation, with risks being identified clearly, managed effectively and systematically reduced. Children who are considered to be at high risk of child sexual exploitation are the subject of weekly multi-agency sexual exploitation meetings until such time as the level of risk has reduced. Senior managers recognise that there is more work to do to ensure that there is a consistently robust response to the offer and completion of return home interviews with children who go missing from home or care.

In Kings Lynn, the early help teams are making good use of their co-location with children's and adult services and the youth offending team to develop and deliver effective packages of support to children and families and, by doing so, safely reduce the demand on children's social care. Family support plans are easy to read, child-centred, specific and measurable and regularly reviewed to avoid drift. When needs or risks increase, cases are stepped up promptly to children's social care services.

Children with disabilities, and their families, many of whom are supported by the family intervention and looked after children teams, rather than by social workers with specialist skills, knowledge and experience of disability, do not always get the help and support that they need. Senior managers are aware of this and are reviewing the thresholds for access to the children with disabilities teams.

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

Yours sincerely

Nigel Parkes
Her Majesty's Inspector