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30 June 2017

Ann Marie Dodds  
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Dear Ms Dodds

### **Monitoring visit of Reading Borough Council children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Reading Borough Council children's services on 31 May and 1 June 2017. This was the third monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in June 2016. The visit was carried out by Nick Stacey and Brenda McInerney, Her Majesty's Inspectors.

The local authority is still not making the expected progress in improving services for its children and young people.

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

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made regarding children looked after, focusing particularly on the timely achievement of permanence as well as the experiences of care leavers. The progress of the local authority was reviewed against the authority's improvement plan targets to assess the pace and scale of the improvements made.

The visit considered different types of evidence, including electronic case records, supervision files and notes, and interviews with social workers, team managers and personal advisers (PAs). Inspectors also spoke to senior managers and the chairs of the improvement board and the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB).

### **Overview**

Progress in making improvements to services for children in Reading reported in the previous monitoring visit remains too slow. The progress made to date against the improvement plan objectives has been too process orientated. A refreshment of the plan for 2017-18 is being led by an interim member of staff, providing cover to the head of transformation and improvement, following the resignation of the permanent postholder.

Work to stabilise the workforce has been ineffective and no progress has been made since the last visit. The majority of senior, middle and frontline managers remain temporary workers and the percentage of permanently employed social workers has declined slightly. Instability at senior management level has increased with the chair of the LSCB, an assistant director and the head of transformation and improvement recently resigning. An experienced permanent Chief Executive arrived in post shortly after the visit replacing earlier interim arrangements. The local authority has very recently introduced some measures which are intended to address long-standing weaknesses in services for children it looks after, but these services are yet to show any sustained improvement. There have been some improvements in services for care leavers since the most recent inspection.

## **Findings and evaluation of progress**

Senior leaders understand that the pace of improvement is too slow. Only slightly over half of children on child in need plans are visited within the timescales stated in their plans and nearly a third have no plan at all. Over a quarter of referrals to the multi-agency safeguarding hub in 2016-17 were re-referrals, and a significant minority of children on child protection plans have been the subjects of plans before. This indicates that partner agencies remain uncertain about referral thresholds, and that statutory social work with many children at risk is still not effective in reducing serious concerns about their safety and well-being. Significant delays and drift remain for children who are in the public law outline, where high-level concerns about them could lead to the onset of care proceedings.

Inspectors agree with most of the findings of internal case audits completed by local authority managers. The audits are now more evaluative and largely focus on the most important areas for children. This indicates that current temporary senior managers are developing a more assured understanding of effective practice that depends less on external auditing. A well-crafted, comprehensive quality assurance framework had been launched immediately prior to the visit. It is a welcome move that the model includes a core focus on live coaching and problem-solving approaches with social workers, rather than more typical, retrospective thematic audits.

Performance management has developed since the last visit and comprises weekly, monthly and quarterly datasets. Monthly performance surgeries have been recently introduced. Explanations and commentaries on national and local indicators are helpful, indicating a more refined approach in attempts to understand the reasons underlying performance trends. Team managers spoken to during the visit use data to monitor team and individual performance. Caseloads remain manageable for the majority of social workers.

Well-thought-out measures have recently been, or are about to be, introduced to address long-standing practice weaknesses. These include establishing an 'access to resource team' and a dedicated court team which has just started to lead on the preparation of evidence for children's cases in care proceedings. An unregulated placements panel has assessed that the arrangements for 14 children and young people who live in these circumstances are safe and suitable. One case seen by an inspector confirmed that close management attention is evident for a young person

who chose to live with a family member who had not met the threshold for approval as a connected person's foster carer.

Social work with children looked after is stronger in a designated team that was created following a service restructure implemented shortly after the last inspection. This team benefits from permanent social workers and a permanent team manager. Management oversight is regular, child centred and evaluative, providing appropriate direction to inform social workers' continuing work. A second dedicated team is not fully formed, given that only two specialist social workers are in post. The local authority has taken too long to complete the restructuring. Consequently, the majority of children looked after remain allocated to social workers in the safeguarding teams, where their needs compete with other urgent work including work with children who are in need or on child protection plans.

The effectiveness of early permanence planning for children looked after is inconsistent, particularly at the point of their second looked-after review, four months after they come into care. Not all independent reviewing officers (IROs) closely monitor the progress of plans and, where they do, social workers do not always follow up the IRO's recommendations sufficiently quickly. There is limited evidence of how these cases are tracked to prevent further delay. Care planning at this formative stage lacks specificity, and parallel planning for children's futures was not apparent in several cases seen by inspectors.

Clear permanence arrangements are better for children who are on care orders and who live in long-term foster placements. These arrangements are formally reviewed and long-term matches are approved by the fostering panel. Children are issued with child-friendly certificates congratulating and assuring them of their permanent, secure homes for the remainder of their childhoods. Many children, looked after by the local authority for long periods, do not receive life story and therapeutic work when they need it.

Social workers work hard to build trusting relationships with children looked after and this is more effective in the specialist looked-after team, where the stability and continuity of workers promote more persistent efforts. The large majority of children are visited within required timescales, although the quality of direct work with them is variable. Often this is limited to general, unfocused conversations rather than planned work and activities to address the important objectives of their care plans. Foster carers and residential homes provide, and promote, a wide range of social activities and interests for children. Many children clearly participate in these and enjoy them. Children and young people benefit from stable arrangements with their carers, resulting in a lower rate of placement disruptions than elsewhere. The virtual school works closely with social workers and carers to ensure that children's educational needs are understood and met, but its ability to broker timely and appropriate educational provision for the high number of children living in other local authorities varies. Consequently, some children experience delays in receiving suitable learning support or school places.

The local authority recognises that the quality of care plans for children it looks after generally remains poor. This is recognised by senior managers and viable plans are in place to work with social workers to improve the care plans. This often results in IROs writing care plans in children's looked-after reviews rather than scrutinising the

progress made. Local authority senior managers have formed a purposeful relationship with the district family judge. Discussions are planned to explore appropriate legal measures and remedies for a number of children looked after who are living with their parents, where continuing care orders are not suited to their circumstances.

Improved transition arrangements allow personal advisers to work alongside social workers, when young people are between their 16th and 18th birthdays, to build their pathway plans. These are closely reviewed by IROs in parallel with their care plans. This enables a phased, planned transfer of responsibility to personal advisers when young people turn 18 years of age. Personal advisers have meaningful, regular contact with all care leavers and the circumstances of a handful who avoid contact are understood and reviewed. Personal advisers see young people with more complex needs frequently, alongside regular phone and text contacts. Access to services to support young people is well coordinated and relevant agencies, including child and adult mental health services, housing and floating support teams, demonstrate a 'team around the young person' approach to meeting needs.

Caseloads have recently increased in the care leavers team to an average of 27 young people allocated to each personal adviser. These are largely manageable, but are at the maximum level. Personal advisers are permanently employed and are experienced. Workloads are closely monitored to ensure that all young people receive a responsive needs-led service and that workloads do not become unmanageable. Personal advisers benefit from regular management supervision, but records are not uploaded to young people's electronic files quickly enough. The team manager's capacity appears stretched as a result of additional responsibility for the local authority contact centre.

Accommodation for young people is mostly suitable and there is clear management oversight of a small number of young people who live in unsatisfactory environments. The number of young people who are not in education, employment or training has not reduced since the inspection. Managers are aware of the particular circumstances prohibiting their engagement, but more needs to be done on a corporate level to increase the opportunities for apprenticeships and employment within, and outside, the council.

The local authority has taken too long to provide helpful information for young people on their entitlements as care leavers. This had not been produced at the time of the visit, which was nearly a year after a recommendation was made in the 2016 inspection. A sample of pathway plans seen during the visit had been carefully crafted with young people, and had simple, well-targeted goals. They are meaningful, helpful documents for young people. There is an effort to ensure plans are reviewed every six months, although this is not always achieved.

Based on the evidence evaluated during the visit, significant weaknesses persist. Progress has been too slow and the service restructure and the improvement plan have led to practice improvements for only a limited number of children. Some limited strengths and areas where improvement is occurring were identified for children looked after, particularly in a designated, specialist team. The experience of care leavers are showing some positive progress, but more work is required to

ensure that the services provided for them consider and meet all of their important needs.

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

Yours sincerely

Nick Stacey

**Her Majesty's Inspector**