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Eoin Rush
Director of Children, Families and Schools
East Riding of Yorkshire
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Dear Mr Rush,

Focused visit to East Riding of Yorkshire children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to East Riding of Yorkshire children's services on 12 and 13 May 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors were Matt Reed, Lorna Schlechte, Victoria Horsefield, Andrew Waugh and Steven Shaw. Kendra Bell, Her Majesty's Inspector (Designate), shadowed the visit.

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centered practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic.

The methodology for this visit was in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. However, the delivery model was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 context. This visit was carried out using a combination of remote video and telephone calls and face-to-face discussion. Inspectors used video calls for discussions with children, and telephone calls to leaders within the local authority. When on site, inspectors were able to have face-to-face discussions with staff, managers and leaders. The lead inspector and the director of children's services agreed arrangements to deliver this visit effectively while working within national and local guidelines for responding to COVID-19.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- the quality of children's plans, to consistently reflect actions required and expectations of families
- management action to address drift and delay in child in need and child protection planning

- the inclusion of multi-agency child exploitation (MACE) meeting recommendations in children's plans to facilitate timely actions to reduce risk
- the quality of the letter before proceedings, so that families are clear about concerns and what needs to be achieved to avoid court proceedings being instigated.

Findings

- Since the previous inspection in 2019, senior leaders have been working effectively through an improvement plan. The council and its partner agencies are committed to facilitating the changes required to ensure that services for vulnerable children are effective. Additional investment has been made to support the improvement plan, and additional scrutiny is ensuring a clear line of sight throughout the council. Practice standards have been established within children's services to provide clearer expectations about the quality of service. Progress has been made, but the COVID-19 pandemic has brought additional challenges to the pace of the improvement programme. Senior leaders have an accurate understanding of where improvements have been achieved and are realistic about the ongoing challenges that remain.
- Senior leaders responded swiftly and effectively to the challenges of COVID-19. The multi-agency forums they created and the strengthened relationships with schools have ensured that the needs of children and families are identified and responded to. Effective partnerships with education and health colleagues have ensured that vulnerable children are seen, their welfare is ascertained and, if required, further support is provided.
- Staff reported feeling well supported during the pandemic. In teams, managers and workers have worked hard to maintain morale. Flexible working has been agreed when needed and regular 'check-ins' have reduced feelings of isolation. Workers have been provided with personal protective equipment, and risk assessments have been updated to support their safety and enable face-to-face visits to be maintained. Senior leaders are reported to be visible and to have kept in touch remotely. Workers reported that they are aware of the improvement journey.
- As part of the improvements at the 'front door', the early-help hub and safeguarding and partnership hub (SaPH) have been separated. This, alongside the relaunch of the threshold document and greater consultation between professionals, has seen a positive and significant reduction in the number of referrals of children that need to be progressed to children's social care. Initial screening of concerns is taking place in a timely way, parental consent is well understood and acted on, and appropriate information is sought from professionals and family members. Thresholds are appropriately applied, and management oversight and decision-making at the front door are mostly timely and effective.

- Child protection concerns are responded to in a timely way, and strategy meetings are well attended by the appropriate agencies. Detailed information is shared, and actions are agreed. Decisions made are proportionate to the concerns raised. Appropriate action is taken to ensure that children are safeguarded. However, subsequent assessments are not of a consistently good quality. While children are seen regularly, and their views are obtained and included in assessments, not all assessments reflect the direct work that is completed with children to understand their experiences. The analysis does not consistently consider the risks and the impact of the situation on the child. Although actions taken are mainly appropriate, the rationale for decisions and next steps is not always clearly recorded on children's records.
- Decisions to 'step children across' from early help to children's social care or from children's social care to early help are appropriate. Children and families are visited in a timely way following allocation, ensuring that there is no delay in receiving the appropriate service.
- Interventions for children who are subject to child in need or child protection plans are not of a consistently good standard for all children. The quality of children's plans varies. Better-quality plans clearly articulate the changes needed, actions required and time frames for them to be achieved. This is not evident in poorer-quality plans, where actions lack timescales, and it is unclear what is required of families. Not all interventions are sufficiently proactive to effect change in children's circumstances. This is leading to drift and delay in achieving timely change in some families, resulting in some children remaining in potentially harmful situations for too long.
- Supervision and management oversight are regularly recorded on children's records. However, in most cases, this is not demonstrating that managers are effective in identifying drift and progressing plans to ensure that all children's circumstances improve within reasonable timescales.
- Children at risk of exploitation and going missing from home or care are monitored effectively by well-attended MACE meetings. Appropriate information is shared, which enables an analysis of risks. However, recommendations from MACE meetings are not routinely included in children's plans, resulting in some actions not being completed in a timely way. In addition, there are insufficient resources and services within the local authority to work with children who go missing or who are at risk of exploitation, leading to some children continuing to be exposed to this risk. Senior leaders are aware of this gap, and a new service will be in place soon.
- An edge of care hub was introduced last year, providing a multi-agency response to children and families in crisis, alongside daytime and out-of-hours services. There is evidence that the edge of care hub has been successful in diverting some children from care, when this is safe and in their best interests. The hub is now permanently funded, and there are plans to expand the service further.

- The numbers of children subject to pre-proceedings are low. Progress is regularly reviewed, preventing drift in decision-making for children involved in this process. However, letters before proceedings contain a lot of social work and legal jargon, which could make it difficult for families to understand them. The letters are not specific about what support has been offered or why concerns are escalating, potentially leading to families being unclear about what needs to change.
- Decisions to accommodate children are appropriate and reflect increasing concerns for their welfare. Where appropriate, members of the wider family are assessed as potential carers, which may enable children to remain in the wider family network.
- Children in care and care leavers have been very well supported. Children in care and care leavers who met with inspectors were very positive about the support they receive from their social workers and personal assistants. They told us that they feel listened to, that staff are very responsive to their individual needs and that their concerns are taken seriously. Similarly, foster carers were overwhelmingly positive about the support that they, and the children they care for, have received from social workers and the virtual school.
- Workers have maintained frequent contact with children in care and care leavers throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, using a mix of face-to-face visits and video calls, depending on the needs of each individual child. Support has been provided in a variety of ways to reduce feelings of isolation and to ensure that needs are met. The physical and mental health needs of children in care and care leavers have been well understood and supported through the provision of additional services.
- The virtual school effectively coordinates services that offer a high level of support to children in care and care leavers with their education. Personal education plans are meaningful documents, tailored to children's individual needs and regularly reviewed to ensure that children's needs are met in school. For children aged 16 and above, plans are clearly focused to ensure that they can access appropriate learning or employment.
- The local authority, alongside school leaders, has a strong grip on the numbers of children who are electively home educated (EHE) and children missing education. Effective monitoring and visits to families ensure a good understanding of the reasons why families have opted for EHE.
- Overall, placement stability has improved, but limited placement options for some children make it difficult to secure the right match. This has resulted in placement moves for some children, most notably those with more complex needs. The lack of placements for children with more complex needs has resulted in more children being placed out of authority; however, there is no detriment to the level of support they receive.

- There are some children aged 16 and 17 years in unregulated placements. Their needs are being met, and additional support is being provided if needed.
- There is one child who is in an unregistered placement. The local authority is alert to this situation and has ensured that additional safeguards are in place.
- Senior leaders provided an accurate view of their service and have identified gaps where further improvement is required. Oversight of detailed performance data enables the identification of trends and is used to shape improvement plans. Children's case file audits remain too process-driven, and those seen by inspectors were potentially overly optimistic about the quality of practice with children and families. Senior leaders are aware of this. They have sought external moderation of audit practice and continue to work with external partners in practice to support the improvement journey.
- Caseloads for most social workers are manageable, but sickness absence and vacancies mean that there remain variations across the authority. As is common in many local authorities, the recruitment and retention of experienced social workers have been challenging. This remains a priority for senior leaders to enable the development of workers and the reduction in caseloads for all.

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

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning your next inspection or visit.

Yours sincerely

Matt Reed
Her Majesty's Inspector