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Dear Mr Smith

Focused visit to Derby City Council children's services

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-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic.

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Derby City Council children's services on 30 June and 1 July 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Julie Knight, Dominic Stevens and Nick Bennison.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in care.

This visit was carried out 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. The lead inspector and the strategic director of people services agreed arrangements to deliver this visit effectively while working within national and local guidelines for responding to COVID-19. Inspectors were primarily on site.

Headline findings

Children's services were last inspected in March 2017, when overall effectiveness and services for children in care were judged to be good. Senior leaders in Derby have continued to provide effective oversight of services for children in care. Strong performance has been sustained in the areas focused upon. Most children are in placements which meet their needs and are supported by social workers who visit them regularly and understand their needs. There has been a steady increase in the numbers of children in care and placement sufficiency remains a constant challenge, particularly for children with complex needs. In response to this demand, senior leaders have begun implementing a comprehensive placement sufficiency strategy and plan, although these are at a relatively early stage in terms of their impact for some children.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The quality of children's care plans, so that they are sufficiently detailed and include clear outcomes and timescales for actions to measure children's progress.
- All children in care to be given the opportunity to participate in life-story work and understand their family history and understand their life story.
- The opportunity for children in care to access advocacy support.

Main findings

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, senior leaders in Derby took quick and effective action to implement targeted risk assessments for all children. Targeted COVID-19 impact audits were subsequently completed to ensure children were visible and risks to them identified. In addition, senior leaders recognised the personal and professional impact of the pandemic on staff, and swiftly implemented new and creative ways of working. Staff report that they have received strong and effective support from senior leaders and frontline managers, which has helped them to continue working with children. Importantly, members of the Children in Care Council (CICC) told inspectors that the pandemic has had little impact upon the service they receive. They are positive about their continued involvement in their looked after children reviews and virtual or face-to-face meetings with their social workers.

Children come into care when this is the right decision for them, and this is based upon an appropriate assessment of their needs and risk. Most children are living with carers, in stable placements that are currently meeting their needs. The majority of children are well cared for and they are making good progress. Due consideration is given to matching children to the right placement and brothers and sisters remain together when this is the right plan for them. Cafcass gave inspectors examples where social workers and managers have given sensitive and considerable thought to finding the right placement for children with diverse needs.

Most children in care benefit from regular visits by their social workers. They have the opportunity to share their views and wishes and are actively encouraged to do so. COVID-19 risk assessments are used effectively to ensure these visits are completed safely and the majority of children's views are appropriately captured in their case records. Despite the pandemic, children's time with their family is consistently promoted and well considered. Children are listened to by their social workers. This is equally the case for disabled children in care who are supported by the Integrated Disabled Children's Service (IDCS).

The majority of children have an up-to-date assessment, with effective analysis of their needs that helps to inform their care plan. Some disabled children supported by the IDCS benefit from exceptionally detailed and sensitive assessments that also comprehensively consider the needs of children's birth families and foster carers.

Senior leaders have rigorously promoted the importance of updating children's assessments across the service and this message has been disseminated effectively to social workers.

Assessment information about children's needs does not always translate into comprehensive care plans. Some children do not have sufficiently detailed care plans and very few contain specific outcomes with timescales to help monitor children's progress. The quality and recording in care plans are too variable and senior leaders had already identified this through their recent 'deep dive' audit activity.

Not all children in care are considered for advocacy or are given the opportunity to have an advocate. While this is appropriately explored by some social workers and independent reviewing officers (IROs), it is not evident in children's records that this service is consistently offered to children. In addition, not all children are given the opportunity to participate in life-story work and understand their family history. Social workers provided inspectors with different reasons for this, including a lack of capacity due to work pressures. This important work to help children in care develop positive identities and self-esteem is not sufficiently prioritised.

A great majority of children have built positive and trusting relationships with IROs because they have been a consistent person in their lives. This provides children with stability in relationships and is especially important for those children who have had changes in social worker and/or when they have had to move homes. IROs are knowledgeable about the children whose care they oversee. They have continued to seek children's views throughout the pandemic using virtual visits, and to consistently discuss children's progress with their carers and social workers. IROs have an effective and proportionate system for monitoring children's progress between reviews.

The vast majority of children have timely reviews and their views appropriately inform decisions. A new child-focused approach of writing review notes directly to children is being embedded into practice. Many notes are of high quality and express difficult messages to children in a kind and thoughtful manner. IRO caseloads remain in excess of statutory guidance, but investment in the service by senior leaders, by providing additional posts, is improving service capacity.

Children's emotional well-being and mental health needs are well considered by social workers and in children looked after reviews. Children and their carers can access a range of appropriate services provided by a newly commissioned emotional health and well-being service, in place since November 2020. Members of the CICC were involved in its design and service name and are proud of their work on the development of a welcome pack for children of all ages coming into care. The impact of the pandemic has slowed down the completion of therapeutic work for some children.

A few children have had several changes of social worker that may have compounded the many other changes they experience, for example, loss of family and placement moves. Senior leaders know that social worker caseloads for some staff are higher than they would want them to be. Despite this, staff are positive about working for Derby. They are committed to the children they work with and know them well. Staff benefit from mostly regular supervision and most records demonstrate that the new strengths-based practice model is beginning to be embedded, which is helping to increase reflection and analysis of the impact of intervention for children.

Children legitimately living in unregulated placements receive appropriate and additional management oversight to ensure that this is the right placement for them. This increased oversight is effective and includes regular head of service scrutiny, escalated visiting frequency by social workers and monitoring by IROs.

Access to a plethora of high-quality performance information ensures senior leaders have knowledgeable oversight of operational practice across the children in care service. Performance information details current performance and appropriately indicates trends and benchmarking. Supporting commentary is insightful and offers clear explanations for any performance fluctuations, detailing the action taken and implication for practice.

Alongside performance management information, there is an effective learning and improvement framework. This provides a range of quality assurance activity which helps leaders to closely monitor the quality of services and outcomes for children in care. Audits helpfully follow the child's journey, so their story is easy to understand. They are mostly succinct and identify strengths in practice appropriately. Audits do not, however, consistently identify actions needed to address shortfalls in individual cases or follow up when actions are identified.

Finding the right placement at the right time for some children with complex needs means that placement sufficiency is an area of continuous challenge. The placement sufficiency strategy comprehensively outlines a range of current and future actions to mitigate and improve this for children by expanding placement choice. It includes new initiatives and investment to enhance in-house capacity and range. A restructure and investment in the fostering service also mean that kinship and connected carers will have a dedicated assessment team and support to help them continue caring for children. Some of these plans are beginning to be delivered but recruitment is ongoing and the assessment team is not yet fully operational.

Inspectors met some members of the CICC, who are a committed and articulate group of young people and rightly proud of the work that they have undertaken for children in care in Derby City. The CICC is fully engaged in the work of the corporate parenting committee and their views have been consistently considered and heard, even when this has been challenging due to the pandemic. The corporate parenting

strategy appropriately aligns with the wider council plan and vision, and demonstrates the achievements and difference it makes for children in care.

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

Your sincerely

Julie Knight
Her Majesty's Inspector