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Alison Noble
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Dear Ms Noble

Focused visit to Derbyshire local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Derbyshire local authority children's services on 7 and 8 May 2025. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Steve Bailey and Russel Breyer.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children subject to a child-in-need or child protection plan.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

Headline findings

Most children with a child-in-need or child protection plan in Derbyshire receive a timely and responsive service from their social workers. Plans are informed by thorough assessments of children's needs, visits and reviews are regular, and workers show commitment to and aspirations for the children they support. In some instances, partner agencies are slow to respond to requests for specialist services to help families facing specific needs and risks, and there is limited evidence of escalation by social work managers to achieve a resolution.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice?

- Consistency of case recording and management oversight, including recorded rationale of key decisions, particularly for interim safety planning and partner escalations.
- The accessibility, clarity and structure of pre-proceedings letters and minutes of meetings to ensure that they are easy for parents to understand.

Main findings

Strategic decisions regarding service structure in Derbyshire ensure that many children benefit from continuity of their allocated worker from first assessment of their needs through to child-in-need and child protection planning. This approach enables most children's plans to start promptly following assessment and successfully supports leaders' chosen model of practice.

Social workers are responsive to the changing needs of children, dynamically reviewing and adjusting plans as required. Changes in need trigger proportionate 'stepping-up' and 'stepping-down' actions, underpinned by a clear rationale formulated through multi-agency assessment and review.

For children already receiving statutory support, well-attended strategy discussions take place promptly when concerns about significant harm arise. Social workers, managers and partner agencies quickly assess risk, enhanced through systematic information-sharing. As a result, managers make well-informed decisions and act without delay to initiate child protection enquiries to investigate concerns about children's safety.

Children are seen more frequently during these enquiries and, if required, child protection conferences are swiftly convened. Most safety plans are realistic and help to keep children safe but, for a small number, interim safety planning places too much responsibility on parents experiencing domestic abuse to protect themselves and their children. Management oversight does not always identify and challenge when partner agencies are too slow to contribute effectively to interim safety planning.

Children's plans are mostly updated regularly in well-attended review meetings. Plans are clearly written, facilitating purposeful review. However, some plans do not focus sufficiently on the impact that support is having for children, which makes it difficult to track progress or re-evaluate current needs or risks.

Most children are visited in accordance with their plan, with both announced and unannounced visits informing workers' understanding of children's experiences and needs effectively. However, for a small number of children, visits lack clear focus, resulting in missed opportunities to progress children's plans meaningfully and consistently.

Workers use a variety of direct work methods to build relationships with children effectively, ensuring that their views are taken seriously. Observations of care, particularly for babies and younger children, are detailed and thoroughly recorded. Work with older children is commensurate with their age and stage and helps them to understand the role of social workers.

For children with a lower level of assessed need, tenacious alternatively qualified practitioners, known as community care workers, deliver well-targeted interventions and bespoke direct work.

Social workers ensure that timely referrals are made to specialist agencies to help parents who are experiencing domestic abuse, poor mental health or substance abuse. Too often, families experience waiting lists for this support, meaning they do not receive the specialist help when they most need it.

Social workers routinely engage family networks well in all aspects of their work. Their attendance at child-in-need meetings and core groups is well supported and their input is valued and promoted, making a significant difference for children.

Disabled children benefit from social workers who understand their needs, advocate strongly and maintain high aspirations. Older children's transitions to adulthood are well planned and timely, with proactive and collaborative joint work with adult services.

The use of specific tools to identify, assess and plan responses for children experiencing neglect is well embedded.

Overall, most work in the pre-proceedings phase of the Public Law Outline, including responses to unborn children, is initiated promptly, well structured and regularly reviewed, making a positive impact on children's progress. Pre-proceedings letters are prepared promptly, and initial meetings engage families effectively. However, the quality of letters and records of meetings often lack clarity, making it difficult to easily understand key concerns and the actions needed to enable children to remain living safely at home.

Support in pre-proceedings is well targeted, addressing barriers to parental progress and building on previous interventions without unnecessary duplication. While the advocacy service has not had capacity to support all referred parents, workers tailor their approach to parents' communication needs throughout the assessment and support period. Many families are successfully diverted from court, with leaders ensuring that any delays in pre-proceedings are purposeful and in the child's best interest.

For a small number of children, incomplete records and changes in social worker have led to delays in progress of both child-in-need and child protection plans. Evidence of management oversight in a small number of records for children subject to interim supervision orders is lacking.

Most social workers for children with a child-in-need or child protection plan receive regular, reflective supervision that helps them to address complex situations. Consistent supervision of community care workers ensures clarity about their role and responsibilities. Managers monitor workloads and take supportive action when pressures affect workers' capacity to complete their tasks.

Leaders, including the managing director, have taken swift action to ensure senior positions in children's services are recruited to. Leaders and managers with long-standing careers in Derbyshire have been successfully developed to take on more senior leadership roles. This has provided continuity and stability for the workforce and positioned children's services well within the wider organisation and the safeguarding partnership board to continue to embed learning, practice and partnerships.

Leaders possess an accurate assessment of social work quality. Comprehensive datasets are used effectively by political and corporate leaders to evaluate service impact in teams and localities across Derbyshire. Collaborative case audits, known locally as reflective practice reviews, show a solid understanding of the components of good practice. Systematically applied moderation strengthens leaders' insight into local context and practice quality. However, these reviews often fall short in critically evaluating the impact on children and in generating opportunities for ongoing individual worker reflection.

Leaders and managers are visible, available and supportive. Their targeted focus to engage the workforce has had a tangible impact in promoting the resilience of teams and individuals, setting conditions for the continued development of practice.

Workers who met with inspectors during this visit, including agency workers, commented positively on the learning offer and consistently reported feeling valued and appreciated by their managers and leaders.

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

Yours sincerely

Steve Bailey
His Majesty's Inspector