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Dear Ms Patel

Focused visit to Reading Borough Council local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Reading Borough Council children's services on 12 and 13 September 2023. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Amanda Maxwell and Nhlanganiso Nyathi.

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. Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including children's records. They talked to members of the Children in Care Council, a foster carer, practitioners and managers, and representatives from the corporate parenting panel.

Headline findings

Senior leaders have made improvements to services for children in care and plans are clear about what is needed to make further progress. They acknowledge the need to further embed the recent changes to their participation offer and corporate parenting panel. They recognise that they need to move swiftly to fully implement these changes to ensure that children benefit in a timely way.

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

- The quality and impact of management oversight and supervision.
- The quality and impact of audit processes to improve social work practice.
- The impact of the corporate parenting panel on driving progress for all children.

Main findings

Most children in care in Reading live in stable homes which meet their needs. Senior leaders are keen to increase the numbers of children who live in or close to the area and continue to focus their strategic development plans on further improving local placement and accommodation options for their children.

Children in care, including disabled children and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, receive child-focused support from committed social workers. Most children have positive and stable relationships with their social workers, who are aspirational for them. Social workers know their children well and have insight into how best to build relationships with each of the children they support.

Thresholds are well understood and applied appropriately. Most children enter care in a timely way and when it is in their best interests. Decisions to come into care, or to return home, are made thoughtfully, being well informed by detailed and thorough assessments. Senior managers oversee these decisions effectively. Children are prepared and matched carefully with carers, taking into account their views, enabling children to feel stable and secure and to make progress. Children are supported well to develop secure attachments.

A small number of children have not entered care soon enough. Senior leaders acknowledge that they have more work to do to ensure that social workers fully consider a child's lived experience and the cumulative impact on children of living in neglectful circumstances.

If it is not possible for children to be returned to their parents' care, the options for next steps and permanence are thoroughly considered and informed by detailed assessments.

Many children in care are supported to live with their extended family or with their brothers and sisters, whenever possible and when this is in their best interests, helping to preserve family relationships. Permanence arrangements are secured at the earliest opportunity. There is thoughtful and sensitive consideration of the most appropriate arrangements for children's longer-term care.

Children are actively supported to maintain relationships with important people in their lives. Family time is encouraged and supported, and there is thorough consideration of what is in a child's best interests and what is appropriate for their needs and those of their family.

Children's plans are detailed and enable carers to be well informed. Children are encouraged to attend their reviews, if they so wish. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) meet with children and gather their views and thoughts about the care they

receive. IROs provide additional oversight and scrutiny via the midway reviews and escalation processes. Reviews and records are mostly written to children, in language which is child-focused and caring. Children have access to translators and interpreters as necessary, which enables them to participate in meetings and in key decision-making events.

Social workers and carers collate mementos and photos to support children in making sense in later life of their journey into care. This happens alongside some creative direct work for some children. When the plan is for adoption, there is full consideration of the short- and longer-term arrangements for contact with birth families.

The participation offer available to children in care has been refreshed recently. Children can attend one of three groups: Care2Listen, Care2HaveFun or Aspire. However, these groups are still developing and not all children have access to them or have opportunities to share their views, to influence service development in Reading. Children have access to advocates and independent visitors when needed.

Clear plans and protocols are in place in the event of an incident involving children who are at risk of going missing and/or being exploited. Children are offered a return home interview following an episode of going missing and most choose to take up the opportunity of a conversation. The information provides insight into why the child went missing and influences future planning. Updated assessments and plans are shared with those in the child's network, enabling others to know how to respond to the child's risks and vulnerabilities.

The needs of disabled children in care are well known and understood. Workers know the individual children well and focus on how best to meet their needs. Most of the children live in homes which meet their needs well.

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are well supported on their arrival in Reading. Their needs are assessed and suitable accommodation is sought. Children are supported to access legal advice, social activities, healthcare and education, and to maintain links with their families if safe to do so. The local authority has responded positively to the national initiative to care for a greater number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

At the time of this visit, two children with complex needs were living temporarily in unregistered children's homes, as no suitable placements in registered settings could be found. Leaders and managers take appropriate responsibility for authorising these arrangements and the chief executive is kept informed. The children are seen regularly and the network around each child meets and provides oversight of these arrangements while more permanent homes are sought.

Children's health needs are assessed and addressed on their entry to care. They are also supported and encouraged to access health services to meet their physical and

emotional health needs. A minority of children are waiting to access child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). In the interim, advice is sought from a triage service that provides advice and guidance to carers in meeting these needs.

Children's educational needs are considered before a placement decision is confirmed. These needs are regularly considered and reviewed by the virtual school. Staff value the support provided by the virtual school. Children are enabled to engage in specific activities that supplement their education and support their ability to engage in education. Children who have not been attending education regularly are supported to re-engage and increase their attendance. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are all supported and encouraged to engage in education via appropriate language courses.

Children are encouraged and supported to take part in a wide variety of activities, hobbies and interests of their choosing, which they enjoy.

There have been some changes in how the corporate parenting panel functions, and members of the panel have had recent training to fully understand their roles and accountabilities. Training has also been offered to employees across the wider council to improve their knowledge and understanding about the collective responsibilities for the children in care in Reading. Senior leaders acknowledge that more work is needed to ensure that the developments are timely and impactful for children. They recognise that children in care currently have limited opportunities to further influence and develop services in Reading.

The quality of supervision and management oversight is variable. Some records show long gaps between supervision, and others demonstrate a task-focused rather than a reflective approach. Stronger examples use a variety of methods to provide effective supervision and management oversight. The use of group supervision sessions is powerful and positively impacts on practice and thinking around challenges in casework.

Social workers have access to a wide variety of training, although it can be a challenge for staff to find time to attend. Workers' caseloads are variable, depending on which part of the service holds the case. The majority of caseloads are manageable and allow workers to spend time with children to develop positive relationships.

Senior leaders have access to a large suite of quality assurance tools that provide clarity about the quality of practice. There is a wide range of audit activities, covering key aspects of practice. The quality of audit activity is variable; some activities are task-focused and lack sufficient curiosity and exploration to identify what is needed to further develop practice.

There has been some turnover in the workforce, with some children in care experiencing several changes of worker. However, senior leaders have been creative

and persistent in their strategies to address this and there have been some small improvements.

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

Yours sincerely

Amanda Maxwell
His Majesty's Inspector