

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231
Textphone 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Helen Ellis
Interim Director of Children's Services
Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council
Council House
Priory Road
Dudley
DY1 1HF

Dear Ms Ellis

Focused visit to Dudley MBC children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Dudley MBC children's services on 13 October 2020. The inspectors were John Roughton HMI, Pauline Higham HMI, Diane Partridge HMI, Andrew Waugh HMI and Stephen Bentham HMI.

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.

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 by remote means. Inspectors used video calls for discussions with local authority social workers, managers and leaders. The lead inspector and the interim director of children's services agreed arrangements to deliver this visit effectively while working within national and local guidelines for responding to COVID-19 and meeting the needs of the local authority's workforce.

This visit looked at the quality and impact of decision-making in help and protection, children in care and care leavers services, together with the impact of leadership on service development.

Overview

There are serious weaknesses in many service areas in Dudley. This is because of long-standing instability in the senior leadership team that has led to delays in addressing strategic and practice deficits. Services for children in Dudley are not

consistently effective in the early identification of risk, and therefore some children remain in harmful situations for too long. The quality of management oversight of individual casework and planning is frequently poor. Plans are not child-focused and actions to improve children's circumstances are not time-bound. This has led to delays in securing the best experiences for children.

There is significant delay in achieving permanence for too many children. Too many children remain in care due to insufficient oversight and grip of permanence planning. Many children who could benefit from special guardianship arrangements remain on care orders for too long, meaning that these children are experiencing drift and delay in being placed with permanent carers. Quality assurance arrangements are not effective in resolving delays. While there have been delays due to court availability during the pandemic, the local authority does not give permanence the priority it needs for children.

Although there are significant weaknesses in core practice which have led to areas for priority action being identified, the response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been positive. Children have been seen and action taken, where necessary, to improve the lives of children. Partnerships with schools have helped to achieve high levels of attendance at school by vulnerable children this term. Early help services have seen an increase in demand during the pandemic, and they have responded effectively in supporting children and families who are adversely affected during lockdown.

Not all senior leadership roles, including the director of children's services (DCS), are filled substantively. The current senior leadership team has recently refreshed the improvement plan, which demonstrates that the authority now has a clearer understanding of the challenges faced across the whole service, and the urgency with which they need to be addressed.

The improvements in services for disabled children since the last focused visit showed that the authority embraced the learning from this visit. Disabled children are now getting a better service, but there is a long way to go to improve all service areas.

Area for priority action

The local authority needs to take swift and decisive action to address the delays in identifying and ensuring permanence for children, including:

- timely application of the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline (PLO), where risks for children are not reducing through child protection planning
- prioritising the swifter progression of plans for children where long-term fostering, adoption, special guardianship or reunification will secure the best permanent homes for them.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The timeliness and quality of decision-making in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH).
- The case transition points across all service areas to prioritise the needs of children and reduce unnecessary changes of workers.
- The pace of progress in the development of responses to non-familial abuse and child exploitation.
- The quality of assessments and child-focused plans.
- The effectiveness of supervision, quality assurance arrangements and senior management oversight.
- The quality and impact of education for children in care at key stage 4, and post-16 qualifications and attainment.

Findings

- Contacts with children's services are not responded to quickly enough. Despite the swift establishment of remote systems and prompt information gathering during the COVID-19 pandemic, decision-making is too slow. The RAG (Red-Amber-Green) rating system to prioritise children is not effective, meaning that an appropriate, timely response to needs and risks is not routinely achieved. Decision-making is not always appropriate in how best to respond to children's needs.
- Strategy meetings are not always held soon enough in order to respond swiftly to concerns, and the recording of the actions needed is not clear enough, or time-bound. Once convened, meetings are mostly well attended by key partners, more so during the COVID-19 pandemic, when they were held remotely. Information-sharing is appropriate and proportionate. Decisions are well reasoned, with a clear rationale recorded.
- Assessments of children are overly descriptive and do not fully analyse the impact of children's situations on their health and development and longer-term outcomes. The child's voice and lived experiences are captured in assessments but do not always sufficiently influence planning. During the pandemic, and where multi-agency support has been more difficult to access and coordinate, social workers have provided help and support to children and families during the assessment process.
- Overly complex arrangements for the allocation of work lead to delays in the completion of assessments. When assessments conclude, children experience further delays in the progress of plans due to another change of worker. A new transfer policy, implemented in July 2020, has not improved practice.
- Since the last focused visit in December 2019, the quality and impact of decision-making for disabled children have improved. The vulnerability of disabled children is well understood by their social workers, and this understanding informs

interventions that best meet their needs. Disabled children are seen in time frames that are commensurate with their needs, and their voices are sought in creative ways in order to inform planning and service delivery. Clear planning is leading to positive outcomes for these children.

- Child in need and child protection plans are not effective due to the lack of specific, child-focused and time-bound actions. This means that it is difficult for families to understand what changes are required to improve children's circumstances, and what will happen should the changes not be made. Where the circumstances of children on child protection plans do not improve, they are not considered at legal gateway panels soon enough and the pre-proceedings stage of the PLO process is therefore delayed. This means that children are left in situations for significant periods of time where risks are not reducing.
- Children at risk from non-familial abuse or exploitation are not always supported well enough in order to reduce risk. The development of a hub model to improve children's experiences is beginning to help the local authority gain a better understanding of its local problem profile. However, services across the partnership are still disjointed. There is a lack of effective integration between children's services and the police in the response to children who go missing.
- For most children who come into care, decisions for them to do so should be taken sooner. Children are subject to ongoing and long-term children's services involvement for too long in situations where their circumstances do not improve.
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, the local authority supports and enables 'family time' for children in care that is appropriate to their needs. This is managed sensitively and in line with COVID-19 restrictions, with these arrangements continually reviewed.
- There is insufficient understanding, oversight and grip of permanence planning. Tracking systems are underdeveloped and do not help to effectively support timely decision-making for children on their journey to achieve permanence. This means that many children with a plan for long-term fostering are not being formally matched soon enough. For some children, delays in achieving permanence have been compounded by their not having an allocated social worker for periods of time over the last six months, due to capacity problems in this area of the service. This has delayed family finding and matching timeliness for a small number of children whose plan has been for adoption. This issue was identified by senior leaders before this visit and has now been addressed. Although children now have an allocated worker, time has been lost in achieving a permanent home for some children. Caseloads continue to remain too high for workers to build meaningful relationships with children.
- Too many children remain subject to legal orders for too long. Children whose permanence plan is for special guardianship or who are placed with parents are not benefiting from their timely progression. The delay in introducing a special guardianship policy and support offer means that too many children remain subject to care orders. This means that children and families experience unnecessary intrusion in their lives.

- The quality assurance and advocacy element that the independent reviewing officer service should bring to the oversight of children's care and progress of plans is largely ineffective in resolving delays. Social work supervision is variable in quality and impact. It is too frequently descriptive, task-focused, not reflective, lacking in depth and not directive enough to help social workers to prioritise their work.
- Care leavers have good relationships with their young people's advisers (YPAs), and they have benefited from a high level of support before and during the COVID-19 restrictions. YPAs recognise those young people who are more vulnerable and lacking in support networks, and they have ensured safe face-to-face visits more frequently throughout the lockdown. YPAs provide tenacious support in securing appropriate accommodation options for young people and have supported young people to remain in appropriate accommodation placements during the pandemic.
- The virtual school headteacher has a strong understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the educational provision for children in care. The quality of pupils' personal education plans is getting better, but targets do not provide enough detail to help pupils to understand how to improve their own learning. Although there was an improvement in attainment at the end of key stage 4 in the 2019/20 academic year for children in care, there is a lack of a strategy to improve pupils' outcomes. As such, there are still too many pupils leaving secondary education without formal qualifications. Consequently, their ambitions for post-16 education are limited by their prior attainment. Not enough children and young people are successful in securing apprenticeships or moving on to university.
- Children who are missing education are not helped to get back into school soon enough. Some pupils find it difficult to settle back into school because they have missed so much learning.
- The rates of fixed-term exclusions for children in care are high. The virtual school is offering support and challenge to schools to ensure that there is a minimal loss of learning by reducing these incidents, but it is too soon to see the impact of this on pupils' attainment.
- The number of children being electively home educated is rising. Concerns identified about the welfare or education of a pupil are prioritised and considered with urgency. However, there is little capacity in the service to deal with the influx of cases since schools reopened to all pupils in September.
- The local authority has significantly reduced its reliance on agency staff since the last inspection, which has helped it to maintain services to children and families throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Although some visits to children were completed remotely in accordance with risk assessments, most services continued without recourse to the flexibilities available in the amended legislation. The local authority has ensured that those most at risk have continued to receive support and, where necessary, appropriate intervention. Partnerships, particularly with schools, have significantly improved during and

post lockdown, with good levels of attendance at school by vulnerable children and engagement by schools in identifying and supporting children at risk.

- The current senior leadership team is very new, with many interim arrangements still in place. There have been several changes of interim director of children's services (DCS) since the last inspection in 2018, and the current acting DCS has been in post for only two months. Instability in the senior leadership team and staff changes throughout the service have contributed to the drift in the local authority's improvement journey. However, an understanding of the challenges faced across the whole service, and the urgency with which these challenges need to be addressed, is demonstrated in the recently revised improvement plan. Leaders acknowledge the need to ensure that appropriate strategic and practice improvements support the development of a culture that has improving the experiences of vulnerable children at its heart. The local authority has provided assurances that, despite budget pressures, responding to the findings of this visit will be a key priority for the council.

We have notified the Department for Education of the areas for priority action and we understand that you will receive separate correspondence from them. In terms of our next steps, we will be considering whether our next activity in Dudley will be a focused visit or a standard inspection in due course.

Yours sincerely

John Roughton
Her Majesty's Inspector