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Riana Nelson
Executive Director of Children, Young People and Families
The Civic Office
Waterdale
Doncaster
DN1 3BU

Dear Ms Nelson

Focused visit to City of Doncaster Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to City of Doncaster Council children's services on 26 and 27 June 2024. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Catherine Heron and John Roughton.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for identifying and responding to children's needs for permanence. The quality and timeliness of permanence was an area for improvement in the last judgement inspection in February 2022.

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, which included speaking with social workers, managers and senior leaders. They also looked at children's case files and the local authority's quality assurance and performance management information.

Headline findings

Children come into care at the right time and their needs for permanence are considered at their first care review. Alternative carers are identified as soon as possible. This includes children staying with family as a first option where appropriate to do so. Applications to court are timely and of good quality, supporting courts to make decisions that provide children with the legal security they need to achieve stability and permanence.

Senior leaders have maintained a relentless focus on service improvement for children and families in this area of practice since the last inspection. Better tracking and quality assurance systems have enhanced leaders' line of sight to practice and performance. This has resulted in leaders knowing their service well, and most importantly, the impact of these services for children and families.

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

- Recognition of children's identity and uniqueness within assessments and care planning.
- The quality of actions, timescales and contingency plans recorded at permanence and legal gateway panels.

Main findings

Children come into care when it is the right time for them. Decision-making is swift and includes senior management oversight. This is well documented on children's records and explains clearly why these measures are necessary.

Children are supported to develop trusting relationships with their social workers. Workers invest time with children and use their skills to engage them and understand the child's wishes, feelings, and what matters most to them. This helps workers to know children and advocate on their behalf.

The voice of very young children is captured through carefully written records that describe workers' observations of the child. Babies' interactions with adults, their likes, dislikes and progress are well documented, in addition to the home conditions that they live in. Workers describe the child's perspective, such as what the child hears, smells and feels. This is especially impactful when understanding what life is like for children experiencing neglect.

Early permanence planning for unborn babies is effective. Pre-birth assessments are timely, thoroughly considering parental history and behaviours, balanced against the needs of the child. The assessments identify where there are potential alternative carers from within the child's network and set clear plans for those children who need to be in care. Assessments reach sound conclusions and make appropriate recommendations that are in children's best interests.

The impact of wider societal factors on the child and their family are not always well considered and evidenced within older children's case records. This limits what is understood about external factors that impact on the child's life and where opportunities and challenges exist.

Children's care plan reviews are held in a timely way and involve children, whenever possible. Consideration of permanence starts at the child's first review and the full range of options are explored, in addition to what needs to be done to achieve permanence. This results in workers undertaking various appropriate assessments simultaneously, reducing the likelihood of delay for the child.

A small number of review records are written to the child, which helps children when they are older to understand decision-making. Independent reviewing officers carry out regular monitoring of children's progress between review meetings and record this activity within the child's record. This oversight provides additional scrutiny to children's planning that helps to maintain a sharp focus on achieving permanence.

Children's written care plans vary in quality. They do not always translate well from the child's assessment or describe what parents and professionals need to do to achieve change in the child's timescale. Leaders have already identified this as an area to improve and have meaningful plans in place to address this.

Applications to court are timely and, when necessary, expedited. They are effective in securing appropriate legal protection for children. They clearly set out what work has been carried out with the family and why moving into care is the only option for the child. Workers appropriately identify when the child's extended family members can safely care for children. This enables all realistic and safe options for the child to remain within their family to be considered, for short-term and long-term care.

Relatively small numbers of children live with their parents on an order. In these circumstances, there is considerable management oversight and tight care planning to monitor risks to children and their progress. This is ensuring effective safeguarding and purposeful interventions that inform the child's final plan.

Doncaster's sufficiency strategy is making a positive difference for children. It has been effective in increasing all placement options. As a result, fewer children live outside of the area and more children now live closer to their community where appropriate. Placement stability for younger children is an increasing strength, but for some older children with more complex needs, placement stability is a challenge. The local authority is aware of this and has meaningful plans to address it.

The ambitious senior leadership team has been further strengthened with the appointment of additional service leads. They receive strong political and corporate support from a committed chief executive and lead member. Both are well informed about children's services, which enables greater scrutiny and challenge to leaders.

Leaders have strengthened their line of sight and management grip around children's care planning, which is resulting in children achieving more timely permanence. This is evidenced in the number of quality assurance and performance measures introduced. Weekly panels provide a forum for discussion between workers, managers and senior leaders, and influence decision-making on children's care. Panel records show key decisions for children, but the actions, timescales and contingency plans are not always well documented. This makes monitoring progress and identifying drift more difficult to recognise and address.

Workers spoken with during this visit said they enjoy working for Doncaster and feel well supported. They told us that their workloads are busy but manageable. Workers described a positive working environment where leaders are visible and personable, taking the time to speak with workers, ask how things are, and most importantly show curiosity about children's experiences.

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

Yours sincerely

Catherine Heron
His Majesty's Inspector