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Dear Ms Turner

Focused visit to Kingston-upon-Hull children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Kingston-upon-Hull children's services on 15, 16 and 21 July 2025. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Christine Kennet and Sally Sinclair.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for placement decision-making for older children, with a particular focus on children over 14 but not care leavers.

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

Headline findings

Overall, permanence planning, practice and stability for children in this age range is steadily improving, with most children making good progress. While there is still some work to be done to minimise delay for a small number of older children in care, the overall direction, underpinned by effective partnerships, a stable and increasingly knowledgeable workforce and a significant investment in placement sufficiency is positive. A range of systems are in place to monitor children's journeys through care towards permanence, ensuring management oversight of their plans. Hull's relational approach remains firmly rooted in a 'family first' ethos, prioritising safe and supportive family environments wherever possible.

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

- The timeliness of 'placed with parents' assessments and arrangements for senior leaders sign off. (principle 4)
- Planning for children to ensure that permanence is achieved for all children and without delay. (enabler 2)

Main findings

Children's social care in Kingston-upon-Hull has continued to benefit from a stable and consistent team of senior leaders at a strategic and operational level. Strong political commitment to children's social care is demonstrated by the cross-party support for investment in infrastructure, workforce development and in reducing the previous reliance on agency staff. Although financial sustainability remains a challenge, leaders have made the decision to continue to invest in sufficiency, workforce and training, and this was seen at this visit in the availability of local homes for children and a more stable and permanent workforce.

Children benefit from a culture of strong relational practice and collaborative support, where managers at all levels step in to ensure that both children and practitioners are well supported. Social workers know their children well and spoke with real care and commitment about them. They visit regularly and at a level needed to build relationships and trust to meet children's needs, with examples of effective, culturally sensitive and skilled direct work to help children understand their experiences.

There has been significant investment in sufficiency through developing residential children's homes within Hull and expanding support within the fostering service. There has been a continued investment in the workforce, which has resulted in successful recruitment, retaining a more stable workforce and raising staff morale. Leaders have created a culture within the council where staff feel respected, valued and believe that they can get the support they need to do positive relational social work with children and families.

Leaders have supported the development of children's participation within the service through the Young Voices Influencing Care (YVIC) group. Children's voices are strongly influencing the planning and development of services, for example through co-producing the development of child-friendly standards for the independent reviewing officers (IRO). The IRO service encourages this work and is challenging plans where necessary, progressing permanence plans through sustained engagement and active case oversight. Committed practice is evident across the workforce to understand the needs for children's safety and well-being, and social workers know the children with whom they work well, are child focused and this shines through their practice.

Inspectors saw strong work to consider the most appropriate placements for children. Social workers and managers consider all the factors that might influence children's safety and well-being when making placement decisions. Social workers take time to get to know children well and understand their experiences so that they can make the right placement choices for them if they cannot be supported to live safely at home.

Fostering services have been under transformation since the last full inspection with new initiatives being established. Additional resource and capacity delivered through a separately established team put in place to complete viability assessments have

reduced the time children's circumstances remain in care proceedings, and more established support for long-term foster carers is improving placement stability. Leaders know there is more work to do to support those wider family networks further and that there are some delays in securing permanence for a small number of children who are placed with their own parents to secure these arrangements formally.

A wider focus on recruitment, retention and support for foster carers is supporting maintenance of both foster carers and supported lodgings. Staying put arrangements are established and social workers, alongside the fostering team, start planning for these arrangements early to give them the best chance of success and to organise finances and practical arrangements early.

Significant investment in developing children's homes within the city means that many children can live close to their home. There are very small numbers of children in unregulated placements and only one child in an unregistered children's home. Where these do happen, there are clear systems to support interim care planning for example when children are living in placements that do not or are unlikely to meet fostering standards and regulations. The kinship approach within this age range, when children sometime 'vote with their feet' and return home, is giving appropriate safeguards and dynamic risk management in supporting family-led planning. Regular visiting and management oversight of all these arrangements ensures forward planning for these children.

Most children's experiences considered during this visit show that they are making good progress, being encouraged to attend education and have their health/emotional health needs met, which is making a difference to them.

Pathway plans and needs assessments identify risks and needs for children well and the use of mapping and words and pictures is helping children to understand what the risks are and what is going to happen to support them and keep them safe.

The work of the IRO team is significantly strengthened since the previous inspection. A trauma-informed approach, strong leadership and a focus on participation are key drivers in improving children's experiences. Most reviews are taking place within timescales, and children have strong relationships with their IROs. Children are encouraged to attend all or part of their review or talk to their IRO before meetings to ensure their voice is included. IROs routinely hold midpoint reviews, which demonstrates their sustained engagement and active case oversight. Despite much closer scrutiny and effective identification, for a small number of children, this has not prevented delay. The IRO service in Hull overall demonstrates a clear focus on improving outcomes for children in care.

Workforce stability and morale have improved, supported by a 'Grow your Own' approach and the development of the social work academy. Agency staffing has reduced, and retention is improved as a result. Staff are overwhelmingly positive about working in Hull and an increasingly stable workforce say they are being given

the tools to enable stronger practice. Staff spoke highly of the support they received from managers, consistently referencing the accessibility and responsiveness at all levels of leadership.

Partnerships across the city are generally strong, particularly with the police and local NHS Integrated Care Board. The therapeutic support offer for children is well embedded in Hull's children's homes.

Children we met with spoke with confidence and insight about their extensive involvement in a range of participation projects, including 'Dream On' and 'Just Ask'. These projects provide powerful platforms for raising the voices of children, and their national recognition reflects the quality and relevance of the work produced. The most recent work through YVIC has been developing the game, 'The Cards You're Dealt', which is used in staff training and corporate inductions. Children also have an active role in staff recruitment and presenting at the corporate parenting panel. These efforts have helped embed a culture of listening and responding to children's experiences.

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

Yours sincerely

Christine Kennet
His Majesty's Inspector