

22 March 2017

Mr Damien Allen
Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council Children's Services
Civic Office
Doncaster
DN1 3BU

Dear Mr Allen

Monitoring visit: Children's services provided by Doncaster metropolitan borough council (DMBC) and Doncaster children's services Trust (DCST)

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Doncaster children's services on 28 February and 1 March 2017. The visit was the third monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in November 2015. Her Majesty's Inspectors, Graham Reiter and Rachel Holden, and Regulatory Inspection Manager, Parveen Hussain, conducted the visit.

The local authority and the Trust continue to make significant progress in improving services for its children and young people.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made for children looked after. As this area was judged to require improvement in the single inspection, inspectors wanted to be assured that recommendations were being progressed and that the council and Trust had maintained focus on this group of children. The monitoring visit focused on the following areas:

- The quality of assessment and care planning for children looked after, in particular the achievement of timely permanence for children
- Placement commissioning, sufficiency and stability
- The capacity of the virtual school to support and monitor the educational progress of children looked after
- The capacity to offer an independent visitor service to those children who need this
- Strategic direction and management oversight of practice, including the use and effectiveness of performance management and quality assurance information.

The visit considered a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers and managers, meeting with children and young people in the Children in Care Council (CiCC), discussions with and information from children and young people and carers, meetings with senior managers and the lead member and discussions with partner agencies. The visit also considered information provided by the Trust and the council, performance management and quality assurance information and electronic case records.

Overview

Significant and continuing progress is evident in terms of the quality of services for children looked after since the single inspection. Thorough actions have been taken in response to the recommendations and have had positive impact. Children and young people are at the heart of strategic planning and operational work. In casework seen, the outcomes for children who are looked after are improving and good. The Trust and the council are ambitious for children looked after. They know themselves well, and effective performance management and quality assurance systems mean that good practice is recognised, practice deficits are identified promptly and actions are taken to address these. There has been some progress in relation to the education of children looked after as a result of strategic and operational developments. Further development is planned and required to evidence wider impact in this area.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Based on the evidence gathered during the visit, we identified many areas of strength, and progress was evident in all areas where the need for improvement was identified at the single inspection.

A key element of the progress for services to children looked after has been the development of a stable, well-supported, and permanent workforce with manageable caseloads. This means that social workers know the children and young people well. They are committed advocates and clearly want the best for them. Effective direct work is undertaken by social workers, including with very young children. The voices and views of children come through strongly and are clearly taken into account in the planning and the work undertaken.

A very impressive and well-supported Children in Care Council (CiCC) has developed into an effective and influential group nationally and locally. At the time of the single inspection in 2015, it had only been in place for four months. At a national level, the Trust's young advisors contributed to consultations by the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) with its views on the provision for mental health services for children in care. As members of the CiCC, children have also spoken at the all-party parliamentary group (APPG) about their experiences of contact or, as they prefer to call it, 'visiting family'. Locally, children who are looked after are members of key strategic boards, participate in staff interviews, and deliver Total Respect training. Young advisors have advised on the children's home refurbishment programme and

co-hosted and contributed to staff summits. The CiCC are currently supporting performance management developments to ensure that social work visits to children looked after are meaningful. Overall, they are clear that their views are taken seriously and that they are able to influence developments, describing the CiCC within the Trust as a 'big trust family who work [sic] well together.'

Assessments which effectively identify the needs of children looked after are now undertaken and updated regularly in the vast majority of cases seen. All children seen are looked after appropriately. Timely assessments, particularly those undertaken within care proceedings, support effective and early permanence planning for children who become looked after.

Clear plans for permanence are in place in a timely way for the vast majority of children who are looked after. There is detailed management oversight and monitoring of permanence plans. When plans are not in place, which is in only a very small number of cases, the reasons are known, understood and addressed. In these cases, the absence of a plan has not had a negative impact on the children. Timely progression of the work to achieve permanence for children and young people is particularly effective for younger children. This improvement has effectively addressed the single inspection recommendation in relation to management oversight of and timely planning for permanence.

Effective and coordinated partnership working was evident in the casework seen on this monitoring visit.

Reviews are effective in ensuring that work is progressed in a timely way. Children and young people are supported to participate in their reviews through a variety of creative methods. Any shortfalls in action and case management are identified by the independent reviewing officers and effectively addressed.

A child-focused independent reviewing service is a strength in Doncaster. This service provides effective challenge, oversight and support for work with children. The current caseloads mean that there is the capacity to deliver an effective service.

While overall planning has progressed in a timely way, variability in quality remains a feature of written plans. Plans seen identify areas of work required, but are not used well to support ongoing work and are not consistently updated in a timely way. Laudable efforts have yet to result in comprehensive outcome-focused plans that are written for and valued by all the young people for whom they are produced. However, examples were seen in which bespoke plans effectively support and help the understanding for children who have additional needs.

Issues of identity, heritage and religion, in particular when the child's background is other than White British, are thoroughly considered. There is sensitive and effective work addressing the impact of traumatic experiences on children's identities. There is

also effective work to ensure that children's contact with birth and extended families contributes to a clear understanding of their backgrounds.

Effective placement commissioning for individual children is supported by clear information about children's needs, including pen pictures. When young people have more frequent moves, assessments are updated to reflect changing needs. Young people are appropriately involved in decisions, and the Trust works hard to ensure that placement choice is offered when possible.

The sufficiency strategy is informed by a detailed needs analysis. Ambitious and innovative approaches, supported by the Trust and the council, are being developed to meet the identified placement needs for Doncaster's children looked after. Progress to date has underpinned improved and good performance for placement stability. The numbers of children experiencing three or more moves have reduced from 57 at January 2016 to 39 at January 2017. Current Trust data indicates that both short-and long-term placement stability performance, at the time of monitoring, is better than published national and comparator averages. National innovations funding has been secured for three more years to support the further development of an effective fostering initiative, which is run by the Trust. Significant council investment is also supporting the expansion of in-house residential provision to meet the identified need for more local homes for children placed in residential care.

The council has significantly increased the capacity of the virtual school, as recommended by the single inspection, and more effective structural and governance arrangements are now in place. Increasingly effective coordination of work with social workers sits alongside improvements in the quality of personal education plans (PEPs). Case examples seen on this monitoring visit evidenced individualised support packages improving young people's educational progress and social workers' understanding and promoting children's educational needs. A pilot to reduce fixed-term exclusions had recently started at the time of the monitoring visit and it is too early to evidence clear and sustained impact. There is a firm plan to implement an electronic version of the PEP (e-pep). Further work is required to evidence wider impact on the educational attainment of children looked after.

Developments in the structure, the membership and, crucially, the chairing of the corporate parenting board by the lead member are now embedded following the single inspection. As a result, the board has an effective overview of services for children looked after. The development of the multi-agency looked after panel (MALAP) is helping to implement the revised and ambitious looked after children strategy. The voice and contributions of children and young people are gained from a variety of sources, including through board membership of two care-leaver apprentices. Examples of work in which the board has driven practice improvements include the timeliness of initial health assessments (IHA), which shows a significant improvement from 35% completed in required timescales for the quarter before the single inspection in 2015 to 76% to date in the current year.

Effective performance management and quality assurance processes ensure that senior managers have a detailed and accurate understanding of the quality of frontline practice. Frontline managers and staff are supported in undertaking good-quality and timely work and, where there are practice deficits, these are promptly identified and addressed. A thorough audit programme is appropriately moving from ensuring compliance to an increasingly effective focus on quality and impact. Performance information and reporting were identified at the single inspection as an area for development, but on this and previous monitoring visits these have significantly developed to be an area of particular strength.

There has been a thorough and creative response to the single inspection recommendation in relation to independent visitors, which has increased the number of matches made, particularly through a range of recruitment initiatives. The current rates for matching children with independent visitors, as a percentage of the looked after population, are significantly higher, at 6.7%, than those of similar-sized authorities (between 0.8 and 2%). While there are still some children waiting to be matched, the percentage of children waiting is lower in Doncaster than the national average.

Staff with whom inspectors spoke during this monitoring visit were all positive about working for the Trust in Doncaster. They feel well supported by managers and said that senior managers are visible and approachable. There are wide-ranging training and development opportunities. The reflective, learning approach driven by the Trust is clearly appreciated and demonstrated in the improving quality of work and positive attitudes of social workers.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Graham Reiter
Her Majesty's Inspector

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Mr Paul Moffat
Doncaster Children's Trust
The Blue Building
38–40 High Street
Doncaster
DN1 1DE

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