

Aviation House
125 Kingsway
London WC2B 6SE

T 0300 123 1231
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



22 September 2017

Mr John Macilwraith
Corporate Director for Children's Services
Cumbria County Council
Cumbria House
117 Botchergate
Carlisle CA1 1RD

Dear Mr Macilwraith

Monitoring visit to Cumbria County Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Cumbria County Council children's services on 22 and 23 August 2017. The visit was the 14th monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in March 2015. The inspectors were Sheena Doyle HMI, Caroline Walsh HMI and Lorna Schlechte HMI.

The local authority is making steady progress in improving services for children and young people in the west of the county.

Areas covered by the visit

On this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the west of the county. Eighteen cases were selected in advance of the visit. These included cases from children in receipt of help and protection services, children in care and care leavers. The cases were selected from those that the local authority had audited over the past six months as part of its routine auditing arrangements.

The visit considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records and supervision notes. For nine of the cases, we spoke with the case worker or team manager and, where relevant, the child's independent reviewing officer (IRO).

Overview

The progress that inspectors have seen in other areas of the county on previous monitoring visits is being reflected in the west of Cumbria. Historical drift and delay are now being challenged, and child-centred practice is more visible. Despite known challenges to recruitment, particularly in this part of the county, the local authority's drive to stabilise the workforce is showing signs of success, and more permanent staff are now in post. This is contributing to more effective planning and improving outcomes for children.

More effective oversight by IROs since the last monitoring visit is leading to more timely escalation to care proceedings. Children's plans are now being more regularly reviewed to maintain progress. The quality of recording in case files is improving, but is still not consistently good enough. Not all plans are up to date, and poorer quality chronologies and minutes from core groups continue to hamper progress for some children.

Findings and evaluation of progress

The local authority's audits continue to be thorough and to contribute to raising standards of practice. Auditing, and the audit moderation process, ensures that managers regularly discuss best practice and that senior managers have a good overview of the knowledge-base of middle managers. Strengths and weaknesses are clearly identified, and practitioners find the feedback helpful in developing their practice. In the sample scrutinised by inspectors, the local authority judged two cases to be inadequate, with the rest judged as requiring improvement or good. Inspectors largely agreed with the narratives and findings of the audits. In both cases judged to be inadequate, the key shortfall was the quality of case recording. Despite this, these children are making very good progress and thriving. The benefits of the social work support that they had received is clear, despite the weak recording.

File reviews and discussions with workers, managers and IROs evidenced improvements in social work practice since the last inspection. Sensitive, child-centred practice is now visible. Children's cases were seen where historical poor practice and drift are now being addressed, resulting in children's outcomes improving. Workers know their children and families well, and could articulate both their needs and an analysis of their circumstances in detail. Assessments are generally thorough and take account of past, as well as present, circumstances and concerns.

Social workers and personal advisers understand the value of seeing children and young people on their own, and regular contact is now well embedded in practice. Some strong examples of direct work with children were seen. Most direct work is purposeful, and helps children and young people to understand their circumstances and cope better. Children's views are carefully considered and analysed by practitioners. Their views routinely inform assessments and plans.

Some cases were seen where the application of specific risk assessment tools was warranted, yet had not been used. This has been raised in previous monitoring visits. The use of domestic abuse risk assessments and the neglect graded care profile tools would have helped to accelerate and refine workers' understanding and analysis of the issues for children.

Effective and tenacious engagement by social workers and personal advisers with families remains a strength for the local authority. Proactive persistence ensures a full understanding of the child's and family's circumstances and needs. Good

engagement with children, young people, their parents and wider family members means that children's plans proceed more swiftly and their circumstances get better.

Case recording continues to improve, with an appropriate focus by auditors and managers. Workers understand the importance of recording their work with families. Some shortfalls were seen, for example gaps in chronologies, which remain an area for improvement. Records of core groups are often brief and it is sometimes unclear who has attended or how well the plan is progressing. Records of home visits are still variable in quality. Some are detailed and analytical, and inform the child's plan well. Others lack clarity of purpose or findings. It is a positive move that the majority of recording shortfalls are now rectified in a timely way, following identification through auditing or general management oversight.

Effective liaison with other agencies was seen in the vast majority of cases. Partner agencies make appropriate referrals to children's social care. Attendance at key meetings, such as child protection conferences and strategy meetings, is good and leads to well-informed and appropriate decision-making. Emotional well-being services and family support services contribute to plans and help children and young people effectively. Family group conferences are now convened appropriately and help to identify wider family support. The local authority acknowledges that there is still a need to improve arrangements and transitions between children's and adults' services. One young person had not had support from adult social care, and another was likely to need an assessment or support from adult mental health services, yet arrangements were not yet in place. There is insufficient multi-agency participation in child protection core groups to ensure that children's holistic needs are considered and met.

The local authority makes good use of legal proceedings, including the Public Law Outline, to progress plans swiftly. This helps families to understand professionals' concerns and what needs to change. Clearer management oversight and use of the Gateway panel is now ensuring progress, and improvements are seen in children's circumstances. This robust activity ensures that children do not experience drift and delay when, for example, child protection plans are not having the desired impact for the child.

Children in care live in nurturing foster homes and benefit from careful consideration of contact with birth family members. They are helped to understand their histories through effective life-story work. All children now have a plan for permanence which is clearly monitored by the IROs. For most children these are working well, but for a small minority they are still not being progressed swiftly enough.

Most care leavers are experiencing improving outcomes. They have a good range of accommodation, including the option of staying with their foster carers after the age of 18 if they wish and it is in their best interests. They are encouraged and supported to attend education, training or employment. For a small minority of care leavers, their written plans are not robust or clear enough. These young people have

multiple needs and we could see that a range of staff were continuing to work together to try to help them. The local authority was aware of these young people and accepted the need to strengthen their plans.

The local authority has appropriately focused on improving the quality of supervision for social workers. Most social workers now have regular supervision, and they value this. In the majority of cases, managers keep a close oversight of progress. In a few cases where this was not evident, the local authority had taken action to remedy this, for example through the performance management of staff. Supervision is often appropriately task-focused, but in a minority of cases seen it still does not focus sufficiently on how to tackle delay and drift.

IROs are now having a positive impact on children's progress. They oversee cases to ensure that children's plans are progressing. When they do not feel that the plan is working well enough, there is better use of the dispute resolution process. Cases were seen where this had led to improved and accelerated stability and outcomes for children.

The long-standing difficulties of recruiting and retaining sufficient staff and managers in the west of the county have been vigorously addressed. An improved offer for new and existing staff, combined with upskilling staff and managers, has led to a gradual reduction in the reliance on agency staff. Although children and families continue to experience changes in social workers, an improved handover between workers, combined with better case recording, is mitigating the negative impact of this to a significant extent. The improved workforce stability sets a strong baseline for practice, going forward.

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

Yours sincerely

Sheena Doyle

Her Majesty's Inspector