

13 June 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 4 and 5 April 2017. The visit was the 13th monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in March 2015. The inspectors were Sheena Doyle HMI and Lorna Schlechte HMI designate.

### **Areas covered by the visit**

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress that has been made in services for children looked after and care leavers. Six cases were selected in advance of the visit in order to track the local authority's arrangements for promoting the welfare and progressing outcomes for children and young people looked after. The local authority then audited these cases.

During the visit, we considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records and supervision notes. In addition, we spoke to seven social workers, seven team managers and five independent reviewing officers.

### **Overview**

Taking into account the local authority's most recent performance information, its improvement plan and the findings from this monitoring visit, the local authority is making expected progress in some areas of practice.

### **Evaluation of progress**

The local authority's audits continue to be thorough and demonstrate its aspiration to achieve high standards of practice. Auditing arrangements continue to improve auditing skills within the management group, and to generate productive discussions on best practice, which further strengthen the process. Strengths and weaknesses are clearly identified and practitioners find the feedback helpful in developing their practice.

The impact of independent reviewing officers (IROs) continues to be increasingly positive. Reviews are regular, with additional reviews held when this will benefit the child. Attendance at reviews by relevant professionals from other services means that there is full consideration of the child's holistic needs, including support in school and leisure opportunities. The local authority's preferred practice model is increasingly seen in assessments and reviews. Children's case files show that IROs regularly review their progress, although better use needs to be made of the established dispute resolution arrangements. Greater oversight by IROs is an improvement, but this now needs to be carefully balanced to ensure that they maintain independence from case management.

The greatest challenge for the local authority is in providing children and young people with stability of service, given the high number of social workers and other professionals that they have experienced during their involvement with children's social care over recent years. For some older young people, this experience has contributed to their distrust of children's social care, making it more difficult for current workers to develop good relationships with them. Although many of the staff changes are historical, too many children and young people are still experiencing frequent changes of worker; this requires careful oversight, to minimise further changes of social worker through case transfer whenever possible. Despite this, file reviews and discussions with workers and managers evidenced current, sound, child-centred practice, tenacious efforts to develop trusting relationships with children, and orderly case transfers between staff when possible.

Stability has also been compromised by historical poor placement and matching arrangements, leading to many children experiencing multiple placement changes, and drift and delay in securing permanence. Some disruption meetings have been held, but not in every case, so the local authority does not learn lessons from every placement breakdown to achieve better matching. Recent social work involvement shows good efforts to remedy previous shortfalls like these, and ensure that children and young people have more stable futures.

The quality of children's plans and assessments is variable; inspectors saw some good examples, which take account of relevant historical factors, showing careful analysis leading to robust plans. All the children and young people have social work assessments, which is an improvement since the last inspection. Specialist assessments are commissioned when required. Some social work assessments are of a high standard and are thorough, resulting in plans which protect children and promote their outcomes well. However, of the sample of cases looked at, a few were not sufficiently up to date. Not all children who need one have a contingency or parallel plan should the preferred option fail. A few assessments do not reflect recent changes in circumstances, and this tends to occur when children have been looked after for a while. Because of this, it is not always clear why plans or placements have changed. The local authority is aware that, of the cases inspectors looked at, for a

small number of children, placements are not meeting all of their needs well enough. However, when inspectors spoke with social workers they were able to describe and analyse each child's circumstances, articulating, for example, complex family dynamics that led to a change in the plan. It is a strength that social workers have such in-depth understanding of the children they are responsible for, but this needs to be translated into written case notes so that children's plans are fully informed. Some workers thought that plans only need updating if there was a crisis, and this could be done at the child's next review, potentially confusing the two processes of planning and reviewing.

Inspectors saw improvements in areas of compliance since the inspection for children looked after and care leavers. For example, reviews are more timely, and health and education assessments are updated. Case recording was up to date and generally thorough. Case files contain chronologies, but they vary in quality. However, social workers who were able to articulate their understanding of the importance of chronologies now populate a larger proportion of them. This is an improvement from chronologies that have previously been generated by the electronic recording system. Staff also said that there was a strong emphasis from senior managers on good quality recording, including chronologies.

Another strength is that all the children and young people are seen alone, where appropriate, and social workers understand the extra effort required to gain a child's trust, particularly if the child has experienced changes of workers. Good use is made of direct work/play materials. More work is needed to ensure that every child, including older young people, understand their life story, and this work has not yet started for some older young people. Important decisions about children are not always communicated to them in a timely way, such as why they had moved placements. This is important so that, for example, young people do not blame themselves for the actions of professionals.

Contact with family members and important others is reviewed regularly, and changed in accordance with the child's needs. This is particularly strong at the early stages of a child becoming looked after and during court proceedings. Contact with siblings is considered, but requires revisiting at all stages of a child's life, not just at the start of when they become looked after.

Case files include well-recorded, regular supervision sessions, evidencing appropriate management oversight. Management oversight is bolstered by the permanence panel, which also monitors case progress, but this requires further attention, as one case had not been brought to panel as it should have been. Social workers were all positive about management support and supervision. They are sufficiently experienced and most of them are permanent employees. Team managers are positive about the changes they have experienced in Cumbria. They understand and agree with the improvement plan and expressed feelings of loyalty towards, as well as support from, senior managers.

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**