

8 June 2018

Ms Kim Drake
Interim Director of Children's Services and
Head of Safeguarding
Reading Borough Council
Bridge Street
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Dear Ms Drake

Monitoring visit of Reading Borough Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Reading Borough Council children's service on 15 and 16 May 2018. This was the sixth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in June 2016. The inspectors were Nick Stacey and Lorna Schlechte, Her Majesty's Inspectors.

The local authority is gradually improving services for children in care, and many benefit from living in stable, caring homes and receive increasingly attentive and effective support from social workers. However, leaders and managers have considerably more to do to provide a consistently high standard of support and services to all children in care.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the area of children in care, with a particular focus on:

- the quality of assessments, plans and support provided
- the impact of management oversight and the standard of recording on children's electronic case files
- responses to children in care who go missing from home
- the impact of the independent reviewing service.

A range of evidence was considered during the visit, including electronic case records, supervision notes and other information provided by managers. In addition, we spoke to a range of staff, including social workers, independent reviewing officers (IROs), managers and other staff.

Overview

The quality of early planning for children in care is not yet consistently good enough, with some children, including infants, experiencing delays in planning for permanence. Oversight of pre-, and court, proceedings is insufficiently rigorous and does not prevent children experiencing delay.

The majority of children in care are allocated in the two specialist children in care teams, where they are seen by social workers regularly. The quality of direct work with children in these teams is improving: work is planned, thoughtful and effective. IROs are strengthening their oversight of children's plans and children's progress towards permanent, settled homes. Children are given good support to meet their health and educational needs.

The children in care council (CiCC) has recently broadened its scope, offering more children opportunities to participate in activities, provide feedback and influence the priorities of the corporate parenting board.

Overall, progress in addressing pertinent recommendations of the 2016 inspection has been too piecemeal and fragmented, but plans for accelerating and embedding improved services for children in care are now realistic and achievable.

Findings and evaluation of progress

When children first come into care, their cases are held in the safeguarding and court teams, and the quality of work with children at this early stage is variable. Despite recent measures to strengthen early permanence planning, parallel care planning is not always in place. Inspectors saw delays in early, pro-active planning for possible adoptive placements for some infants, and for older children who had not been formally matched with their long-term foster carers.

Oversight of children who are in pre-proceedings or in care proceedings is insufficient and does not ensure that all assessments are 'front loaded' and completed within prescribed timescales. For some children, assessments of family members during care proceedings are delayed, extending the proceedings. Only just over a quarter of care proceedings are completed within 26 weeks.

Social workers in the specialist children in care teams, where the majority of children in care cases are allocated, carefully build trusting and meaningful relationships with children. Manageable caseloads and a dedicated focus on children in care allows social workers to do more structured and planned work. Social workers use a range of interactive approaches to engage with children of different ages. Social workers work with children to understand their feelings about being in care, their relationships and contact with their families, and how to promote their educational

achievement and engagement in leisure activities. Social workers' records of the visits are improving and some demonstrate well how important objectives of children's care plans are being met. Social workers are exercising more care and attention when they record their direct work with children in care. In many cases, this provides a clear understanding of children's views, achievements, concerns and worries. Examples were seen of children's wishes being actively considered, for example in changing contact arrangements with family members. Social workers, children and their families are generally clear about contact arrangements. However, these are not consistently recorded and should be clearly detailed in children's care plans.

In many cases seen during the visit, life-story work was in progress, but social workers could not always show evidence of this work on children's case files. Some life-story work starts too late. Managers and IROs are aware of this and plans are in place to provide training to staff to support them to complete this important work.

Social workers' reports to children's looked after reviews are helpful information updates, but the majority are not evaluative assessments. This means that children's progress in relation to important objectives of their care plans is unclear. Children's care plans are typically retrospective and repetitive accounts of the circumstances resulting in their entry to care, and a review of their needs rather than a forward-looking, specific and measurable plan. The local authority recognises this shortfall and is on the cusp of launching a new care plan format, the content of which has been helpfully informed through consultation with social workers.

Children in care are supported by an effective virtual school, working closely alongside social workers. Emotional and behavioural impediments to learning are considered in addition to careful targets and support to improve attainment levels. Personal education plan meetings are held regularly and the plans are quality assured, resulting in more refined and measurable targets. The pupil premium is used well to provide both additional tuition and emotional and behavioural support to help children to focus on learning.

Children in care have their health needs assessed and reviewed promptly and regularly. Assessments include a welcome focus on healthier eating and regular exercise. Many assessments are comprehensive, holistic reviews of children's physical, emotional and mental health. Most recommendations are subsequently met through attendance at designated appointments. A dedicated child and adolescent mental health service for children in care facilitates swift access to therapeutic assessments and interventions. However, this service is not available to the majority of children in care who are looked after outside Reading.

The impact and scale of IRO oversight and challenge is increasing through midway checks and visits to children in care. This is in addition to timely reviews and regular contact with social workers to seek updates on the progress of review recommendations. Recommendations are largely detailed, specific and achievable. Review minutes are written in an accessible, child-friendly style, but many take too

long to be uploaded to children's case files. The volume of IRO challenges has significantly increased over the last year, but the tracking of responses to them is not rigorous enough. Senior managers acknowledge this and are tackling the issues raised to generate targeted learning and service improvements.

Although the council has successfully recruited more local foster carers, the percentage of distant and out-of-borough placements has increased. The provision of residential therapeutic placements for older children with complex and challenging needs is often determined by availability rather than diligent, needs-led matching. This results in a small number of children's placements repeatedly breaking down. The required approval of the director of children's services for out-of-borough, 'distant' placements is not clearly evident in children's case files.

The response to a small number of children in care who repeatedly go missing is largely effective. For children living in or close to Reading, a commissioned local provider undertakes return home interviews and additionally deploys creative approaches to engage children in activities that help divert them from risky behaviours. For children living outside Reading return, interviews are 'spot' purchased, although only a small number of interviews are completed as the majority of children refuse them. Imaginative and pragmatic efforts are subsequently made, however, to secure information about missing episodes from carers and others who know the children concerned. The circumstances of and risks to children who refuse interviews are known and monitored.

In some return home interview records, considerable detail is recorded about the missing episode, but this does not consistently lead to a concise analysis of 'push and pull' forces. This means that an informed projection of the likelihood of further missing episodes and a credible risk reduction plan are absent in some cases. Strong multi-agency operational arrangements for reviewing and tracking missing children at higher and lower levels of risk are evident, but decisions and recommendations of these meetings are not reliably and promptly uploaded to children's case files.

The corporate parenting panel closely considers performance information concerning children in care, but the response to challenges arising and issues raised by the children in care council is too slow and unwieldy. The action plan and 'traffic light' system are not achieving timely improvements. More children have participated in the CiCC over the last year through activity-based events promoting greater engagement.

The workforce is increasingly stable. It is positive that 64% of social workers, and 70% of frontline managers, are now permanent members of staff. This is the highest proportion since the inspection. Most third-tier management posts are now also filled with permanent members of staff. Many locum social workers have been in their posts for lengthy periods.

Inspectors observed a calm, purposeful working environment in the teams they visited. This included the safeguarding service, where significant difficulties in

workloads are being purposefully addressed. Morale was positive and workloads considered manageable by social workers. Frontline managers were regarded as accessible and supportive. The children with disabilities team has made substantial progress in addressing the findings of an earlier monitoring visit. A social worker in the team is undertaking effective and important work with a highly challenging young person in care who has a recent history of numerous placement breakdowns.

Management oversight of children in care is largely regular, but there are significant delays in loading notes to children's case files. In a significant minority of cases, considerable gaps in supervision are evident. This was more prevalent where children's cases are not allocated in the two specialist looked after children's teams. Supervision recordings identify tasks to be completed and concise directions are helpful for social workers. However, supervision records do not show how children's changing needs are analysed or how social workers are supported in approaching direct work with children

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Nick Stacey
Her Majesty's Inspector