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Dear Damian Allen

Focused visit to Doncaster children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Doncaster children's services on 4 December 2018. The inspectors were Neil Penswick, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Jan Edwards, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need, children subject to a plan and children in care, with a specific focus on services for disabled children.

Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers from the specialist children with disability team, from the area child protection and children in care teams, and meetings with managers. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.

Overview

An independent provider, Doncaster Children's Services Trust (DCST), delivers all services for children in need, children in need of protection, children in care and care leavers, with the exception of the virtual school, family hubs and stronger families provided by the council. Doncaster council acts as the local commissioner with responsibility for contract management. The statutory functions of the director of children's services are retained within the council.

At the last full Ofsted inspection of children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers published in January 2018, all services were judged to

be good. The council and DCST were seen to be working well together, knowing their strengths and areas needing further development. The trust was highly effective in developing a culture for good social work to flourish. As a result, the quality of social work was good, supported by a well-embedded model of social work practice. There was a highly effective performance management and audit programme. On the last inspection, inspectors did see a lack of timeliness in completing assessments and drawing up plans, for a small number of children, for the most part in the children with disability team. However, no child was seen to be at risk due to these delays.

This focused visit continues to see Doncaster council and DCST focusing highly effectively on improving its services. They have an appropriate but challenging ambition of being recognised as outstanding by the next full Ofsted inspection. All of the small number of recommendations made at the last inspection have been fully delivered. The council and DCST know the quality of their services well.

Inspectors saw that all of the disabled children who had been assessed and identified as children in need, and were receiving services from the DCST, were being provided with a high-quality service which was delivering evident improvements in their lives. On a small number of cases, the quality of recording was thorough but not as consistently of a high quality as the majority of cases. Children's views are robustly at the centre of all social work practice and exceptionally well-recorded.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- Continue to ensure that the quality of social work recording, written plans and supervision is of a consistently high standard

Findings

- All of the social workers who met inspectors know their children exceptionally well. They talk with great personal enthusiasm and knowledge about them, including their strengths and any challenges they are facing in their day-to-day lives. Workers are creative, adapt their communication styles and use a variety of tools to involve children and identify their views and needs. In the main, the quality of recording of those views, and the integration of those in the planned work, is of an exceptional standard.
- Assessments are generally of a high quality, timely, thorough, and describe the needs of each individual child in the family. Inspectors saw many very good examples of where disabled children's health, medical and identity needs were evaluated. This includes the impact of these on the child and on the family.

- All planning is of a good quality across the teams. This includes regular meetings, which are timely, involve representatives from other agencies and parents, and, when appropriate, the children. When children are not able to be involved in meetings, their views are well represented by the chairperson, social workers, parents and carers and advocates. Social workers describe children's needs well, including what needs to happen next. Some of the written plans are not as high quality as others, lacking focus and timescales.
- When a disabled child has been assessed as a child in need, the quality of support work is of a high standard. The work is well coordinated and focused on improving the outcomes and life chances for those children and their families. Inspectors saw examples of outstanding work making significant improvements in children's lives.
- All social workers are trained in, and utilise, an established model of social work practice. As a result, risk is well considered in all cases and complex safeguarding issues are identified and responded to a high standard. Strategy meetings are held promptly. In the main, these are well attended by partner agencies and are well recorded, identifying clearly the actions needing to be taken. There are regular and well-attended core groups and child protection conferences. Children are visited according to their plans. They are seen alone and their views sought.
- Disabled children in care are visited regularly, seen alone when appropriate or with other key individuals that the children trust. When possible, placements are secured in local provision that meets their complex needs, including residential establishments and independent fostering associations. Inspectors saw some very good examples of consideration of placements together for all children in a family. Older children are involved in forming their own pathway plans. As a result, these are comprehensive and of good quality, identifying appropriately additional vulnerabilities as well as being aspirational. Transitions work demonstrates good relationships between the DCST and the council adult services, with ongoing plans that result in a smooth transfer to support in adulthood.
- All of the social workers who met inspectors reported that the size of caseloads are reasonable and that they have the opportunity to carry out direct work with children and their families. They report that training is very good and that it helps them with their professional development. A particular mention was made of the regular 'Stop the Clock' sessions held during the working day and focused on bringing workers up to date on key issues.
- Supervision is regular. Social workers report that they benefit from these formal meetings, the support offered and the constructive challenge from their managers. The recording of these meetings does vary in level of detail and focus, with some, but not all, reflecting the quality of supervision described by workers.

- Management oversight is clear and well documented on all of the children's electronic files. This is well supported by robust performance management and quality assurance systems which provide very good quality information on the work being undertaken. Inspectors saw individual audits which had been undertaken on disabled children's work over recent months. These were detailed and accurate. Newer audits that included observations of practice were of a very high quality.

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

Yours sincerely

Neil Penswick
Her Majesty's Inspector

cc Paul Moffat Chief Executive Doncaster Children's Services Trust