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Dear Steven Forbes,

Focused visit to Leicester city council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Leicester city council children's services on 22 January 2019. The inspectors were Rachel Griffiths, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Julie Knight, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need and those subject to a child protection plan, including children receiving help and support from the disabled children's service.

Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers and team managers and observations of meetings. They also considered local authority performance management, quality assurance information and children's case records.

Overview

Leicester children's services were last inspected by Ofsted in July 2017, when the overall effectiveness of the service was judged to require improvement to be good. Since then, a strong, permanent and well-focused senior leadership team has built on the progress seen at that inspection. The local authority is successfully implementing a new approach to working with children and families based on a recognised model of practice. This is helping to improve the quality of social work practice and beginning to have a positive impact on outcomes for children and families. This, as well as a much more stable workforce with manageable caseloads

in both the children in need and disabled children's service, is enabling social workers to spend more time with children, build better relationships with them, and devise plans in consultation with them to improve their lives.

The quality of assessments and plans produced by social workers, although still variable, is on an upward trajectory. These assessments and plans are enabling risks to be better identified and reduced. As a result, more children are receiving effective support. A strength is the intensive support provided for children within the public law outline (PLO) process. This is enabling more children to safely remain living with their families. The views of children, ascertained through direct work, are increasingly informing their assessments and plans. Improved measurement of children's progress against their plans is having a positive impact on some children's outcomes. However, the quality of social work practice is not yet consistent, meaning that not every child in Leicester who requires help and protection receives consistently good and timely support to improve their outcomes.

The local authority's realistic self-assessment of its own performance demonstrates that quality assurance processes are working. Senior leaders have a good understanding of the strengths of their service, and of the areas that require further development.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- Consistency in the quality of assessments and plans.
- Consistency in the quality of direct work with children and in the recording of visits to children.

Findings

- Leaders have now established a stable and well-motivated workforce in Leicester city council's children in need and disabled children's services. All team managers are permanent and there is only a minimal reliance on agency staff. Staff spoken to during the visit were unanimously positive about working in Leicester. They feel well supported by managers at all levels. Staff value the comprehensive range of training available, which they feel enhances their practice.
- Staff are enthusiastic about the model of practice they are now using. They report that the model has provided them with greater confidence and focus in their role. For example, the use of 'mapping' meetings, which involve a range of social care professionals who come together to discuss what needs to happen to effect change and reduce risk for children, helps social workers plan and focus their work to effect change. Inspectors saw that managers and social workers now have a better grip of children's cases that were previously drifting, resulting in actions being taken to address this drift.

- Social workers visit children regularly and work hard to build strong and positive relationships with them. This makes it easier for children to share their worries with someone they have learned to trust. Children are benefiting from some strong direct work undertaken by social workers using a range of tools and activities to help them to understand children's experiences. However, the quality of direct work is not yet consistent, and children's views are not always reflected in their assessments, plans and records. The quality of records of visits to children varies considerably, from being very brief, and providing no insight into the children's well-being, to being comprehensive, and clearly demonstrating what life is like for the child and what needs to happen to help them.
- The quality of children's assessments is variable. Stronger assessments include an analysis of all identified risks to children, consideration of research, for example regarding the impact of domestic abuse on children, and appropriate consideration of children's cultural and diversity needs. Other assessments do not consider all children's needs, some lack information from partner professionals, some fail to fully consider absent parents, and some assessments are not updated to reflect children's changing needs. This means that not all information known about children's needs informs their assessments. Leaders recognise these weaknesses and are acting to address inconsistencies.
- The quality of children's plans remains variable. Weaker plans are less targeted and lack timescales, so it is unclear how progress and change is monitored. These plans can be lengthy and confusing to understand, making it difficult for families to see what they need to do to make and sustain changes in their lives. Other plans are succinct and easy to understand and result in improved outcomes for children. Inspectors saw an example of this when a social worker simplified a version of her assessment and plan using words and pictures. This enabled the parents, who have learning difficulties, to properly understand what they needed to do to improve their children's lives.
- Social workers work effectively in partnership with parents, family networks and partner agencies to devise safety plans for children. However, while social workers, when spoken to, could clearly describe these plans, they do not always promptly or clearly record them. This makes it difficult for others involved in the plan to recall what to do should concerns escalate.
- Social workers feel well supported and value the fact that they receive regular supervision from their manager. Group supervisions are also helping staff to reflect on children's situations when their circumstances are not improving. Newly introduced supervision templates are assisting managers and staff to be more reflective and child-focused. Managers are not yet, however, consistently using supervision to steer case progression through the setting of timescales for actions and the monitoring of the completion of actions.
- Child protection case conferences, child in need reviews and core groups are held in a timely way, with good attendance by partners. Through the skilful use of

scaling tools, families, alongside professionals, are better able to see the changes being made in terms of levels of risk and whether outcomes for children are improving.

- In recent months, some children subject to the child protection process have had the benefit of an advocate as part of a pilot project. Reports given by the advocate to conferences on behalf of children have provided a powerful representation of children's wishes and feelings and have contributed to future planning. However, not all children who might benefit from such advocacy are currently able to access this.
- Where progress is not being made in a child's plan, or risk is increasing, the local authority appropriately escalates their intervention by entering into the Public Law Outline (PLO) process. The use of multi-systemic therapy (MST) and functional family therapy teams (FFT) to provide intensive support to families involved in the PLO process is highly effective in producing improvements for children. These interventions have enabled more children to remain safely living at home with their families.
- An increase in capacity in independent child protection chairs has contributed to their having more manageable caseloads. This has enabled independent chairs to more closely scrutinise children's progress in between reviews and monitor the quality of social work practice. However, as the quality and detail of the recording of the chair's monitoring, tracking and challenge is variable, it is not always possible to see whether this is making a difference to social work practice and outcomes for children.
- The local authority's recently strengthened quality assurance framework includes a programme of thematic and collaborative audits, data scrutiny, increased feedback from families, and practice observation as part of case audits. The framework is effective in both enabling accurate self-evaluation and supporting service improvement. Children's case audits seen by inspectors were child-focused and identified areas of strength and areas for improvement in practice. Staff spoken to during the visit were positive about the audit process and were able to verbalise how this helped them to reflect and improve their practice.

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

Yours sincerely

Rachel Griffiths
Her Majesty's Inspector