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Cathi Hadley  
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Dear Ms Hadley

### **Focused visit to Northamptonshire local authority children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Northamptonshire local authority children's services between 20 and 22 October 2020. The visit was carried out by Brenda McLaughlin, Andy Waugh, Steve Lowe, Brenda McInerney and Chris Stevens, all of whom are Her Majesty's Inspectors.

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic.

The methodology for this visit was in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. However, the delivery model was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 context. In agreement with the Director for Children's Services, the visit was carried out fully by remote means. Inspectors used telephone and video calls for discussions with local authority social workers, managers and leaders, the designated family judge, Cafcass and the DfE appointed commissioner. Inspectors also spoke to teachers, senior health colleagues, children and young people, their parents and carers.

During this visit, inspectors looked at the quality and impact of key decision-making across help and protection, children in care and services for care leavers, and the impact of leaders.

### **Overview**

Despite unprecedented times due to the COVID-19 pandemic, inspectors found convincing evidence that services for children and young people in Northamptonshire

are starting to improve, albeit from a very low base. Committed leaders know their services well and they have cogent plans in place to address the wide-ranging areas for improvement. They are working diligently to address the serious and widespread safeguarding concerns that were identified at the ILACS inspection in June 2019, and to sustain the improvements that they have achieved in the past year. There are no additional priority actions or areas for improvement other than those identified at the previous inspection. Elected members, the local authority chief executive and senior managers, and the interim and permanent chief executives of the Northamptonshire Children's Trust have fully accepted the inspectors' findings. They have stated that they are committed to supporting the development of an environment where good practice across children's social care services can flourish.

Children's services leaders, together with safeguarding partners, responded quickly and effectively to challenges during the pandemic. Their main priorities were to ensure that vulnerable children, young people, their families and staff were helped and protected. The flexibilities made available to local authorities through changes in regulation were used to a limited extent, including the use of virtual visits, and extended approval for carers. All staff, most of whom are currently based at home, report that they feel well supported and that they have the benefit of daily contact with managers and weekly team meetings. They have easy access to personal protective equipment, COVID-19 testing and advice and support for their emotional well-being.

### **What needs to improve in this area of social work practice**

- The areas for improvement continue to be those identified at the ILACS inspection in June 2019.

### **Findings**

- Effective targeted risk assessments of every child open to children's social care or early help services were conducted at the beginning of the pandemic and reviewed regularly during lockdown. Families benefited from prompt and flexible services, and face-to-face visits continued if children were deemed to be at high risk. The risk of harm to children is clearly identified in case records, and this information is shared with relevant professionals. For instance, the daily screening of domestic abuse notifications helps to ensure that risks are understood, and that sensitive child- and victim-centred safety plans are implemented quickly.
- Advice and support provided by early help coordinators and social workers to other agencies during the pandemic have been well received and are helping to build trust across the safeguarding partnership. Leaders understand that it is crucial that this cultural shift is sustained if children are to consistently receive the right level of multi-agency help and support.
- Contacts and referrals for children in need or at risk of harm are being managed effectively in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). Consent from parents and carers for sharing information is obtained or appropriately overridden if

required. Social workers complete agency checks and make recommendations that take the family history into account. However, managers endorse MASH social workers' recommendations for assessment without providing a rationale, and the lack of challenge at this point condones some risk averse decisions and, as a result, contributes to higher numbers of cases moving into assessment unnecessarily.

- Responses to children at immediate risk of harm are effective and timely. When children require further help and protection, cases are passed swiftly to the duty and assessment teams (DAAT). Although re-referral rates remain high, threshold decisions regarding children stepped up from early help services or stepped down from children's social care are proportionate.
- Caseloads in the DAAT teams remain too high. Several practitioners were responsible for more than 35 children. At the time of the visit, the average caseload was 26, with individual caseloads peaking after staff have been on duty for a week. Staff strive to provide children with a responsive service, but inevitably there are delays in progressing casework and a negative impact on the quality of assessments as a result of the continuously high workload. Senior managers are continuing to take action by providing additional resources to improve caseload management, and they have ensured that no cases are unallocated. However, they and elected members accept that, unless caseloads are manageable, it will be more difficult to sustain the requisite improvements.
- Most strategy meetings include other relevant agencies. However, high caseloads and time pressures in children's social care services are leading to insufficient identification of risks for some individual children at the end of section 47 enquiries, and to generalised actions describing what needs to happen next. Many 'danger statements' are overly long, and not all of the actions relate to the risks that they describe. This results in plans that lack focus, which makes progress difficult to measure.
- Conversely, better quality child in need and child protection assessments, using the recently implemented strengths-based practice model, capture the lived experience of children and draw on the views of other professionals, parents and carers. Most visits demonstrate a child focus, but the purpose of the visits is not consistently or clearly linked to the plan. While children are being seen alone and observed in different settings, many assessments are still too adult-focused and do not capture the voice of the child. Nevertheless, there are increasing examples of assiduous, direct child-centered work that informs plans and planning. The quality and impact of decision-making for disabled children are satisfactory.
- Effective collaborative work with safeguarding partners to develop targeted adolescent services is helping to prevent or reduce harm to missing and exploited children. However, services are currently fragmented. Recent action to improve the coordination of information and the alignment of systems to risk assess and protect children missing from home and care, and those children who are criminally and sexually exploited, is positive.

- Improved monitoring and tracking of cases under the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline are preventing drift and ensuring that timely decisions are made about applications to the family court. Cases are escalated swiftly if risks increase. The designated family judge commented positively on recent changes, noting that the local authority 'is proactive and responsive; this was not the case previously'. During lockdown, senior managers worked with the judiciary to set up remote court meetings, which led to more effective and timely decisions being made. For example, 43 young children have been adopted since April.
- At the time of the visit, there were just over 1,100 children in care in Northamptonshire. Just over 200 children have entered care in the last six months. Many younger children are entering care appropriately and in a planned way. Most decisions are informed by timely and comprehensive assessments, with risks clearly identified and suitable plans in place. However, relatively high numbers of children still enter care in an emergency following police protection, including vulnerable adolescents. These are often children already known to a range of services, sometimes for many years. Effective work by the targeted 'edge of care' adolescent services ensures that most children can return to the care of their families in a planned manner.
- Plans for permanence for younger children are now formulated at an earlier stage and are well recorded within children's care plans. Most children are protected and well cared for by committed, experienced foster carers or connected carers. Placement stability and sufficiency for older adolescents are a challenge, including for those living out of area. Regular management oversight of complex and high-risk cases is helping to identify and address issues quickly. A consistent approach to matching decisions and reducing disruption by listening to carers' and children's views is assisting children to continue to live with the same carers and receive support. Foster carers have access to specialist training on managing behaviours and attachment, as well as support from child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS).
- Children in care and care leavers who met with inspectors spoke positively about the support from staff and carers. They thoroughly enjoyed their role as young 'inspectors' in a recent 'practice week'. Social workers, personal assistants and independent reviewing officers have maintained regular online contact with children and their families, and they make face-to-face visits when safe and appropriate. Many children have enjoyed virtual statutory visits, and some young people, who were previously reluctant to engage face to face, now initiate contact with social workers and personal advisers. Virtual statutory reviews are timely and have made it easier for some young people to participate. Children have been helped to stay in touch with family members through carefully and creatively planned contact. Carers actively encouraged and supported safe contact during the pandemic lockdown.
- Accessible mental health and emotional support is available for children in care, and children's health needs are considered at fortnightly operational multi-agency discussions. Specialist support is available in relation to substance misuse and sexually harmful behaviour. Managers recognise that there are gaps in services for

care leavers with mental health needs and/or complex behaviours that do not meet adult social care or health criteria. The pace of change for these vulnerable care leavers is too slow, and development has been further impacted by COVID-19 restrictions.

- Personal advisers maintained online contact with care leavers throughout lockdown and risk assessed face-to-face work as the restrictions eased. Virtual well-being coffee mornings set up during lockdown are open to any young person. The quality and effectiveness of early pathway planning are still variable. Some young people do not have an up-to-date pathway plan. Other children, who are also clearly vulnerable, do not have a current risk assessment. Most care leavers have access to suitable and supported accommodation, although a very small number of older care leavers with mental health problems were found to be street homeless. Access to apprenticeships or internships that lead to employment or training opportunities is limited.
- Effective strategies were put in place by leaders to prioritise the education and protection of vulnerable children and children of key workers during lockdown. Senior managers actively improved levels of communication with school leaders and the response times of 'front door' referral services. For example, headteachers and designated safeguarding leads voiced their appreciation of the additional support provided in securing early help services and in considering applications for elective home education. However, some school leaders remain concerned about the capacity of children's social care services to meet the needs of vulnerable children in their schools. One school leader said: 'When the provision is right, with the right person, the service is fantastic, but this is not consistently the case.'
- A renewed ambition and drive led by the virtual school is starting to improve the educational attainment of children in care. The successful introduction of an electronic personal educational plan (ePEP) means that leaders can act quickly to adjust children's learning experiences and to prevent drift. However, inconsistencies remain, with some children in care experiencing home-based tuition, part-time timetables or time at alternative provision for too long. Managers are beginning to reduce the number of children in care who are inappropriately accessing unregistered alternative provision. Action to reduce the number of children in care excluded from school is positive, but there is more progress to be achieved. Managers do not have a sharp enough oversight of children who are missing education.
- Effective actions taken by senior leaders are resulting in tangible improvements to both compliance with statutory requirements and to the quality of social work practice. Weekly safeguarding partnership meetings during lockdown provided enhanced oversight of the risk to children, and joint resources to support the majority of vulnerable children were used efficiently.
- Performance management has been significantly strengthened by weekly and monthly practice clinics and is helping to drive improvement. The pace of change in the last six months has accelerated, despite the pandemic. Senior managers recognise that they have more work to do to move to a culture of measuring

impact and outcomes, rather than processes. A revised quality assurance framework and the findings from audit activity are underpinning improvements to practice. Supervision is regular, with evidence of clear direction and some reflection, but this is not yet consistent across teams.

- Relentless activity to improve the recruitment and retention of staff is having considerable traction. Most senior and middle managers are in permanent posts, with increasing numbers of team managers and social workers transferring from agency roles to permanent employment. A strong and joined up approach and investment to 'growing your own' staff in the social work academy are intended to increase the number of staff 'who get the basics right'. Senior leaders have a realistic understanding of the challenges facing children's services. They acknowledge that workforce capacity and manageable caseloads at the 'front door' are vital if improvements are to continue.

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

Yours sincerely

Brenda McLaughlin  
Her Majesty's Inspector