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Dear Ms Hadley

Monitoring visit to Northamptonshire local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Northamptonshire local authority children's services on 24 and 25 February 2021. This was the third visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in June 2019. The inspectors were Julie Knight, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Rachel Griffiths, Her Majesty's Inspector.

The local authority is making steady progress in improving services for its children and young people in the areas covered by inspectors in this visit.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made to improve the experiences of children in care, including disabled children, with a specific focus on:

- the quality of matching, placements and decision-making for children in care, including disabled children in care
- the quality of management oversight, challenge and staff supervision in these services and the effectiveness of corporate parenting
- whether performance management information and quality assurance activities provide managers with an accurate view of social work practice to help them to improve the progress and experiences of children.

Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including children's electronic case records and other information provided by staff and managers. The visit was carried out by remote means, to reflect the context of the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic. Inspectors used video and telephone calls for discussions with social workers, senior leaders and managers, the Department for Education-appointed commissioner, the designated family judge and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass). Inspectors also spoke to partners from other agencies, independent reviewing officers (IROs), children and young people and their foster carers.

Overview

The stable and committed senior leadership team is steadily achieving improvements in the quality of services for children in care, including for disabled children. Children's social care services transferred to Northamptonshire Children's Trust on 1 November 2020. The trust has continued to build on the positive changes that were already taking place, supported by a permanent director of children's services and the appointment of an experienced chief executive officer.

Workforce stability is improving and caseloads are steadily reducing, although some children in care still have too many changes of social worker. The majority of children live in well-matched placements that meet their needs. However, the overall quality of the service remains inconsistent and management oversight is not sufficiently robust. A few children still come into care too late or in an emergency and finding suitable placements for those children remains a challenge. Corporate parenting arrangements are underdeveloped, but the Children in Care Council (CiCC) has had a significant impact in shaping services. Senior leaders and managers have a thorough understanding of the strengths of the service and what needs to improve, assisted by good-quality performance information. A comprehensive improvement plan underpins their determination to achieve progress in the experiences of children in care.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Senior leaders have made steady progress in improving services for children in care, including disabled children, since the inspection in 2019. This progress is gathering momentum, following the transfer of children's social care services into the trust arrangement. Leaders have a clear line of sight to frontline practice and know what needs to change to improve outcomes for children. The vast majority of children come into care when it is in their best interests, and the majority of children live in stable placements that are meeting their needs. As a result, most children are settled, well cared for and making progress.

Some children come into care too late and are subsequently placed in emergency provision; they are not always matched to the appropriate placement to meet their needs. Despite the challenges of the pandemic, there have been tangible improvements in placement sufficiency, such as an increase in foster care placements. However, not all children with complex needs are matched to the right placement quickly enough.

A very small number of children under the age of 16 have been placed temporarily in unregistered or unregulated provision. Senior leaders have regular oversight of these arrangements through fortnightly panels, while longer-term arrangements are explored. However, the rationale for the use of these placements is not clearly explained in children's records.

The majority of disabled children in care are settled and appropriately matched to long-term placements that meet their needs. However, some disabled children

needing long-term foster care are waiting too long for suitable placements, despite continued efforts to find them permanent homes.

Children in care and young inspectors have a strong voice in shaping the trust's vision, transformation and review of services. The inspirational Children in Care Council works relentlessly to participate in designing service improvements, with support from senior leaders. Children were very proud to show inspectors their work and gave many powerful examples of the positive impact that they are having on developing and improving services.

Some children in care still experience too many changes in social worker, which has led to some children having little trust in the system and feeling disappointed when there is a change. The changes reduce the opportunity for meaningful direct work and for life-story work to be completed. Other children have a positive and consistent relationship with their social worker and IRO and they feel empowered and fully involved in decision-making. Most social workers know the children they are working with very well and have a clear understanding of their current needs. The majority of children are visited within statutory timescales. Visits to children have been risk assessed during the pandemic and many children have face-to-face visits when it is appropriate.

The vast majority of children have an up-to-date assessment that identifies their needs. Some assessments are comprehensive and help to identify the progress made; this appropriately informs their care plan. However, this is not consistent for all children. Some assessments are limited in analysis and do not consider children's wider needs. Some care plans are not actioned in a timely way and this can result in delays in meeting needs and in achieving permanence. In addition, the quality of recording in care plans remains inconsistent, with some plans not indicating what success for the child will look like.

Most children have a timely looked after review that provides good oversight of their current circumstances and changing needs. Senior leaders know that there is more to do to ensure that IROs consistently seek the views of children and promote their attendance at reviews. Embedding the trust's strengths-based model of social work practice is showing signs of progress, for example in improvements to the quality of recording of reviews.

Children in care benefit from having time with their families promoted and prioritised. Social workers carry out well-balanced COVID-19 risk assessments. This ensures that children can see their families face to face when it is safe to do so, or through alternative virtual means of communication if necessary. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children benefit from assessments that explore their life history and which include clear analysis and reflection on the impact of their journey and the trauma of not having contact with their families. Social workers try very hard to establish contact with the families of these children.

Children who go missing from care receive a prompt multi-agency response to ascertain their whereabouts and safety. The 'missing children' team, part of the

targeted adolescent service, supports children who have gone missing, and all children in care are offered an independent return interview when found. The quality of risk assessments and safety plans when there are concerns that children may be at risk of exploitation is inconsistent. Safety plans are not always up to date, which reduces their effectiveness.

Not all children in care have timely initial and review health assessments and dental checks. This has been a particular challenge during the pandemic. An appropriate plan is in place to improve their timeliness and a new dental check pathway is currently being developed to ensure that dental checks are kept up to date. When children need access to emotional and mental health support, the specialist Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) for children in care offers a comprehensive range of support for children and their main carers, including appropriate oversight of the support being provided for children in care placed out of area.

Adoption is appropriately considered for children early and continues to be promoted as a permanence plan where this has been assessed as the right plan for the child. Since April 2020, 70 children have been placed for adoption or had an adoption order granted. The judiciary and Cafcass report that achieving permanence for children via adoption is a particular strength, despite the challenges during the pandemic.

The quality of frontline management oversight, challenge and formal supervision continues to be inconsistent across the corporate parenting service. Supervision records do not always capture or reflect on children's circumstances and there are missed opportunities to drive forward children's plans, resulting in delays, as actions agreed are not sufficiently specific and have no timescales. However, staff report that they feel supported, that their managers are approachable and that senior leaders are visible.

The continuous drive by leaders to recruit and retain staff is having a positive effect on the stability of the workforce and, as a result, caseloads continue to reduce. The trust's chief executive makes contact with every social worker who expresses an interest in working for the trust. Improved working conditions and active senior management engagement are helping to reduce staff turnover and the number of vacant posts.

The senior leadership team is ambitious, child-focused and committed to improving the lives of children in Northamptonshire. The team has taken prompt action to develop partners' understanding of their corporate parenting responsibilities. However, the corporate parenting board is underdeveloped. While there is a clear vision for its role in the future, it is currently having little impact in championing improvements to the experiences and progress of children in care, including disabled children.

Performance information is of good quality. Weekly performance clinics and dashboards, supported by detailed performance reports across the service, keep managers and senior leaders well informed about children's outcomes. Leaders are still in the process of fully embedding the quality assurance framework. Children in care practice weeks, together with auditing and a strong focus on getting the basics

right, are all contributing to the quality assurance process. The imminent establishment of a quality assurance board, chaired by the chief executive of the trust, is intended to further enhance senior leaders' oversight of and challenge to the quality of frontline practice.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Julie Knight
Her Majesty's Inspector