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Dear Ms Boulton

Focused visit to Redcar and Cleveland children's services

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.

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Redcar and Cleveland children's services on 23 and 24 February 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors were Louise Hollick, Joy Howick, Neil Penswick, Andy Whippey and Stephen Bentham.

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. This visit was carried out by remote means. The inspectors used video calls for discussions with local authority staff and partner agencies. The lead inspector and the director of children's services agreed arrangements to deliver this visit effectively while working within national and local guidelines for responding to COVID-19.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- Social workers' caseloads, to have the capacity to support children and families appropriately.
- The impact and effectiveness of the quality assurance programme, including case auditing, so that it provides a systematic process for understanding, improving and evaluating practice, to improve life experiences for children.

- The quality and timeliness of assessments and planning, to focus on the child's needs rather than the adults.

Findings

- It has been a challenging year for Redcar and Cleveland. In February 2020, there was a council-wide cyber-attack, which meant the loss of access to all IT systems. The council responded swiftly under its emergency planning and business continuity plan, and within hours set up a temporary Multi Agency Children's Hub (MACH) using partners' systems to access information to uphold safe decision-making. Within days, read-only access to the IT system was recovered and paper files were established to ensure that children's record-keeping continued. As the organisation began to recover the systems, the COVID-19 pandemic started.
- The strategic partnership was already in emergency planning mode when the first national lockdown occurred, and this enabled them to continue at this level of alert to provide a prompt and effective response to the pandemic. There have been relatively high rates of COVID-19 infection in Redcar and Cleveland and the local authority has spent an extended period of time in Tiers 3 and 4 of the national restrictions following the first national lockdown.
- The restructuring of the MACH from a South Tees partnership to a Redcar and Cleveland service has seen improvements in practice. Children and families receive a prompt and proportionate response to initial contacts made to the MACH. Management oversight has been strengthened and improved and is effective despite the challenges of the cyber-attack and COVID-19. The volume of referrals about children who may be in need or at risk of harm has risen considerably since autumn 2020. Despite the high numbers, referrals are progressed in a timely way, with management Red/Amber/Green (RAG) rating, and any children at risk of immediate harm are prioritised and visited. Decisions are made appropriately and at the right threshold. This enables children to receive the right level of service for their identified needs.
- The risks to children of criminal or sexual exploitation are mostly well identified but less so in relation to criminal exploitation. While risks are identified, actions to address and minimise risk are insufficiently detailed or focused within existing plans for children. When children have been missing from home, they receive return home interviews which evidence why children went missing and as a result any risk or harm they have been exposed to.
- The quality of children's assessments is inconsistent. Assessments contain relevant information but some lack a clear analysis of risk and harm that limits the formulation of next steps for focused case planning. Better assessments set out risks in meaningful language for families to understand. Too many assessments take too long. This means that some children wait longer than they

should for their needs to be fully assessed and for interventions to be put in place to meet their assessed needs. Some assessments are overly focused on the needs of adults, and as a result lead to plans that respond to adults' needs and do not contain sufficient child-focused actions.

- Children's written plans are of variable quality. Better plans identify risk well and this enables a focus on improving the child's circumstances. Some written plans lack clear and timely actions and do not explicitly consider the needs of the child. Nevertheless, as children's circumstances change or risks escalate, there is a timely and appropriate response to ensure that the right level of support is offered.
- During the pandemic, all children have benefited from having their needs assessed and prioritised as well as their individual risks from COVID-19. This has then ensured that they are visited at a frequency that meets their needs. The majority of children subject to child in need and child protection plans are seen face to face by their social workers, with safety measures put in place to mitigate any COVID-19 risks. However, not all children are seen alone by their social worker. This prevents children being given the opportunity to share their thoughts and wishes freely.
- When children and young people are subject to pre-proceedings under the public law outline, there is a lack of concurrent planning in some cases to determine what assessments and interventions are required to improve their circumstances. Extended family are not always identified and assessed early enough with a view to providing alternative care for children should it be required. This adds delay for those children subject to pre-proceedings when their needs can no longer be met at home.
- Children are brought into care when they cannot safely remain at home. There is a strong emphasis on supporting children to be looked after in their extended families. When care proceedings are required, these are issued without delay.
- Although there have been some challenges during the pandemic around placement sufficiency, for the vast majority of children in care there is good consideration of their needs and appropriate matching of placements including for fostering, residential and specialist support services. For children with the most complex needs, there has been an active and creative approach to finding suitable placements that meet their needs, for example securing temporary approval as a foster carer for an approved supported lodgings host when there was no pre-approved foster carer available. Children are able to maintain links with their families despite the government restrictions. Family time is prioritised and takes place face to face, subject to COVID-19 risk assessment and supported by video and phone contact.

- There are a small number of children who have experienced placement breakdowns due to the additional pressures during lockdown periods. When this happens, social workers are considerate of the impact of this on children and support them to move to new placements, using virtual visits to introduce them to their new carers. This helps to prepare them for the move even when they cannot physically visit in advance.
- Initial healthcare assessments for children coming into care have been subject to delays due to the additional pressures on healthcare provision from COVID-19. However, once health needs have been identified, services are put in place to address these needs. The need for emotional health support is identified and there is no delay in accessing additional support when children need it, despite the pressures on provision during the pandemic.
- Care leavers report feeling well supported by their personal advisers, who are easily contactable and have provided them with welcomed emotional support during the difficult days of lockdown. However, the quality and frequency of support for all care leavers is not always apparent in case recordings. For some care leavers, the level of contact has not been assessed to determine whether this level was consistent with their needs.
- Virtual school leaders are tackling historical weaknesses in provision and have taken effective decisions to ensure that children in care have been safe during the pandemic. There remains a high level of fixed-term exclusions when pupils' behavioural needs have not been met effectively. This has had a detrimental effect on their education. Virtual school leaders have provided relevant training for local authority and school staff on attachment issues to raise awareness of pupils' needs.
- Young people entering post-16 provision have been well supported to remain in employment, education or training during the current pandemic. The guidance for these young people has been effective in ensuring that they make informed choices about their career options. However, the proportion of young people who are not in employment, education or training by the age of 18 remains an area of focus for leaders.
- The proportion of pupils moving into elective home education has spiralled during the pandemic. There is a clear system of identification in place. Leaders have been effective in working with parents to explain the legal requirements of home education and to reduce the number of formal requests when it is not in children's best interests.
- Leaders have selected and rolled out a social work practice model, but it is not yet consistently embedded across all service areas. While there is still work to do to fully incorporate the methodology, it is beginning to have an impact in the MACH and for some individual social workers' case management. In these cases,

there was evidence of better assessments and plans, with good analysis of risks and more child-centred planning. This is not yet consistent; leaders are aware of this and have plans in place to use the model more widely as a tool to assist better practice.

- Leaders are aware that performance and quality assurance need to improve. Efforts have been made to develop a quality assurance programme, but this has been hindered by the cyber-attack and the COVID-19 pandemic. The auditing programme is not sufficiently coordinated or extensive. Case file audits lack critical analysis, and there is very little focus on the impact of practice and how this then does or does not improve children's experiences. It is therefore difficult to see how audits are an effective process for understanding and improving practice.
- Social workers have high caseloads. This is impacting on their ability to practise to their best ability and capacity. For some children, this has an impact if their worker cannot give them the right level of contact and attention that they require. Leaders are fully aware of this issue and are attempting to increase the overall staffing levels so that caseloads can become more manageable. There is a commitment from the corporate leadership team to provide additional finance for this recruitment.
- Social workers are well supported, and leaders have managed the welfare and safety needs of workers through the most difficult challenges of the cyber-attack and the pandemic. Leaders have listened to their workforce and ensured that social workers have access to COVID-secure office spaces for those staff who cannot always work from home and for those who need some face-to-face support.
- Strong, strategic and operational partnerships have enabled continued effective support to children during the pandemic. The partnership has worked together to develop practice, learning from significant incidents and rapid reviews. Children subject to care proceedings benefit from a strong and collaborative relationship with the local judiciary and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service.

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

Yours sincerely

Louise Hollick
Her Majesty's Inspector