

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231
Textphone 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Riana Nelson
Director of Learning Opportunities and Skills
Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council
The Council House
College Road
Doncaster
DN1 3AD

Copy to: James Thomas, CEO, Doncaster Children's Services Trust

Dear Riana Nelson

Focused visit to Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council children's services.

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit on 23 and 24 February 2021 to Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council children's services (the council) that have delegated their children's social care statutory functions to the Doncaster Children's Services Trust (the trust). Her Majesty's Inspectors were Matt Reed, Amanda Maxwell, Margaret Burke, Andrew Waugh and Jon Bowman.

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. This visit was carried out fully by remote means. Inspectors used video calls for discussions with staff, managers and leaders within the local authority and the trust. The lead inspector, the director of learning opportunities and skills (holder of the statutory director of children's services), and the chief executive officer (CEO) of the trust 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

- The focus on the quality and impact of intervention in case-file audits.
- The analysis of risk for children experiencing long-term neglect.
- The consistency of recording to provide evidence of multi-agency reviews of plans and progress.
- Visits to care leavers and management's oversight of the support provided to them.

Findings

- Senior leaders across the council and the trust acknowledge that 2020 has been a challenging year for children's social care. They reported changes in the senior leadership teams and social work staff throughout this period, which led to a reduction in managerial support, challenge and oversight. The pandemic has created additional pressures across children's social care. Increased demand within the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) and rising caseloads in the assessment teams resulted in some children not receiving the right service at the right time.
- Despite the challenges, senior leaders responded swiftly to the emerging concern and threat of COVID-19. Building on experiences of the flood response in 2019, Doncaster declared the situation a major incident prior to the first national lockdown, ensuring that a multi-agency emergency response was triggered. Existing forums were adapted, and new ones created, to focus on emerging needs. This is enabling a proactive, multi-agency partnership response to vulnerable children. Emerging trends have been identified, such as an increase in domestic violence and in alcohol consumption among adults. Additional funds have been set aside from the COVID-19 relief fund to address these issues.
- Effective working relationships between the council and the trust prompted a review of contact and referral practice in September 2020. This identified inconsistent practice and some weakness in management oversight. Leaders acted swiftly, alongside a highly engaged lead member and strong political support, to mitigate the concerns. Staffing establishment for the front door and assessment service has been increased significantly to manage demand. A new improvement board has been put in place, and a refresh of the threshold documents is starting to have some positive impact.
- Partnerships within the MASH are developing, and this is contributing to improved information-sharing and consideration of thresholds. Management decision-making within the MASH ensures that the appropriate threshold is applied in most cases. However, the response to contacts and referrals is not yet consistently timely. Parental consent is well understood, and clear management reasons are recorded. In cases seen by inspectors, there is a robust response to domestic abuse concerns and appropriate use of assessment tools to inform decision-making.

- Child protection enquiries are mostly effective and timely and involve the relevant partner agencies. The subsequent assessments are detailed, with a clear analysis focused on reducing risk and ensuring the immediate safety of children. Managers provide clear oversight and rationale for future actions.
- Social workers have been well supported to continue visiting children according to the levels of risk and need. Despite the COVID-19 restrictions, direct work is continuing. This is being used effectively to provide support and reassurance to children and their families and to gain an understanding of children's views and experiences.
- Child-in-need and child protection planning is not consistent for all children. While most threshold decisions are appropriate, the evidence of planning and multi-agency information-sharing is stronger for some children than for others. In stronger examples, there is clear evidence of children's progress being monitored in multi-agency meetings and consideration of alternative forums, such as legal gateway panel if risks increase. In other examples, despite support being provided, a lack of multi-agency meetings and a lack of managerial oversight are leading to drift in planning for some children. For children who are experiencing neglect, weaknesses in the analysis of risk mean that some children remain living in these arrangements for too long.
- Decisions for children to step down from a child protection plan at the first review are not consistent across all conference chairs. This has led to some children being stepped down from a child protection plan based on insufficient evidence of sustainable change or reduced risk.
- Doncaster has a multi-disciplinary child exploitation team that is promoting effective partnership working and information-sharing. There is a good understanding of local issues and clear processes regarding assessment and monitoring of exploitation concerns. This ensures that children receive a robust response and appropriate support to reduce risks.
- When children need to enter care, decision-making is appropriate. However, for some children, there are missed opportunities to intervene sooner due to weaknesses in the analysis of risk and in management oversight. When the threshold for the Public Law Outline or care application is met, there is a timely and effective response. Reports to legal gateway panel are detailed, clearly identifying risks and what needs to change. Letters issued to parents before the proceedings make clear the expectations to prevent court proceedings and what support is to be provided. Good management oversight ensures that children are effectively monitored and supported during pre-proceedings work. Timely applications to court contribute to making children safer.
- Children in care are appropriately matched with carers, including family members, to enable their needs to be met. Despite challenges in placement sufficiency, the trust has continued to increase the number of foster carers, and there are plans to develop the service further. Foster carers value the support they receive to enable them to provide care, particularly during the pandemic.

- Some children in care aged 16–18 years live in unregulated placements. Senior leaders maintain strong oversight of these arrangements. The quality of the provision is monitored via commissioning arrangements. Additional support from a number of professionals is offered to young people in these arrangements.
- The value of family time is well understood by social workers, and this has continued to be offered throughout the pandemic. A blended approach of virtual and face-to-face time, individual to the child’s needs, has continued. Young people were positive about the support they had received to see family members. Children and young people reported receiving good support for their emotional health and well-being.
- Independent reviewing officers have effective oversight of children’s plans and ensure that actions from reviews are followed up. The virtual school maintains good oversight of the education progress of children in care. It closely monitors the quality of personal education plans and provides support and challenge to schools on these. The virtual school makes good decisions on the use of additional funds to meet children’s education needs.
- The partnership working between the council, the trust and schools has facilitated a good understanding and targeted response to children who are vulnerable. School attendance has been encouraged, and frequent meetings ensure oversight of the attendance of all children. This collaborative approach has enabled a good understanding of the increase in the number of children who are electively home educated and children missing education. A coordinated response is ensuring early intervention and additional support to vulnerable children in these cohorts.
- The support to care leavers is weaker than that provided to children in other parts of the service. Although most care leavers live in appropriate accommodation, there is a lack of evidence in their records of proactive visits to help reduce feelings of isolation and to ensure that their wider needs are being met. Pathway plans do not address all their future needs, and action is not always urgent enough to support young people into education, employment or training. Management oversight was not well evidenced in case records and did not give clear direction or ensure that work progresses in a timely way.
- Despite the challenges of COVID-19, social work practice has remained compliant and timely. Senior leaders acknowledge that meeting compliance requirements has meant that the quality of service has not been at the level they expect for some families. They have taken steps to rectify this. Five service manager posts have been introduced to increase management oversight of, and challenge and support to, frontline delivery. There is a comprehensive package of performance data that provides an oversight of trends and demands. The audit tool has been revised and is fit for purpose. However, auditors are overly focused on process. They do not focus sufficiently on the quality of provision and impact on the child of their experiences.
- Social workers reported feeling well supported by managers throughout the pandemic. They have had access to personal protective equipment (PPE) and the

COVID-19 vaccine. Risk assessments are updated to help protect them. Most have had regular supervision, enabling reflection on casework. The recording of supervision, however, does not always provide evidence of challenge in relation to drift and delay in case progression. Newly appointed staff reported feeling well inducted, and training for all staff has continued via virtual platforms throughout the pandemic.

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

Yours sincerely

Matt Reed
Her Majesty's Inspector