

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

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



10 May 2021

Pauline Turner
Director Children, Young People and Family Service
Kingston upon Hull City Council
Alfred Gelder Street
Hull
HU1 2AA

Dear Pauline

Focused visit to Kingston upon Hull City local authority 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 a focused visit to Kingston upon Hull children's services between 3 and 4 March 2021 which was carried out by Her Majesty's Inspectors Alex Dignan, Tonwen Empson, Nigel Parkes, Caroline Walsh and Andy Whippey.

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 remotely. Inspectors used video calls for discussions with local authority staff, managers and leaders, children and young people, and foster carers. The lead inspector and the director of children's services (DCS) 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 timeliness of decision-making in the integrated front door (IFD).
- Stepping cases down safely and appropriately from child protection to child in need, or from children's social care to early help.

- Using the Public Law Outline effectively in order to divert children from, and explore alternatives to, care.
- Maintaining regular contact with children in care who are living out of area.

Findings

- Having escaped relatively unscathed from the first wave of the pandemic, by mid-November Hull's infection rate was one of the highest in the country and is still relatively high. However, the local authority and its partners have not allowed themselves to be thrown off track by COVID-19. Not only have they stuck to their improvement plan, they have also taken full advantage of the opportunities thrown up by the pandemic to develop collective solutions to shared problems. By working in tandem with partner agencies, the local authority has succeeded in keeping many children in sight and staying in touch with the most vulnerable.
- The new multi-disciplinary IFD is a significant upgrade on the old early help and safeguarding hub, but it is still a work in progress. While family history is taken into account, risks and needs are considered and relevant background checks are carried out, a lack of critical thought and robust analysis, particularly when domestic violence is involved, means that some children and families are not getting the right help and support first time round.
- The number of referrals about children who may be in need, or at risk of harm, has continued to rise since the first lockdown. This is having a negative impact on timescales and means that not all referrals are screened within 24 hours. Delays in making decisions about how best to respond mean that some children and families are not getting the help and support they need promptly enough.
- When children are considered to be at immediate risk of significant harm, prompt action is taken to safeguard and protect them. However, while most strategy meetings are timely, school staff were, until recently, not routinely being invited to participate. There has been an inappropriate tendency to default to single agency, rather than joint, child protection enquiries with the police.
- The level and volume of demand at the front door are also having a negative impact on the quality and timeliness of assessments. The quality of assessments, which is key to making good decisions with and for children and families, is too variable. Needs and risks are not always fully identified or explored. This has been, and continues to be, a major focus for improvement. Recent action taken by senior leaders means that social workers now have more time to complete assessments before they are next on duty. Senior leaders are mindful that they need to keep this under continuous review.
- Despite COVID-19, most children who are the subject of child in need (CIN) or child protection (CP) plans are being seen regularly, although not always alone. While plans are not consistently specific or measurable, core groups have continued to meet regularly during the pandemic, and they are clearly sighted on needs and risks. Management action is being taken to ensure that child in need plans are also regularly reviewed and updated.

- Vulnerable pupils are identified, supported and prevented as far as possible both from being excluded from school and from becoming children missing education. Effective systems are in place to identify, understand, support and safeguard children who are being electively home educated during the pandemic.
- The high standards set and maintained by the local authority's vulnerable, exploited, missing and trafficked team (VEMT) are not universally evident elsewhere across children's social care services. Away from the VEMT, return home interviews are not always completed with the same level of professional curiosity and attention to detail. Social workers are not consistently using the Risk Identification Tool to best effect. This has the potential to leave children exposed unnecessarily to risk.
- Senior leaders have taken decisive action to try to ensure that children and families get the help and protection they need at the right level. When needs or risks increase, children's cases are promptly stepped up from early help to children's social care. However, on occasions children and families are still being stepped down prematurely from CP to CIN, or from CIN to early help, in a way that is unhelpful, suggesting a degree of naivety or over-optimism.
- Edge of care services in Hull are underdeveloped. During the pandemic, the number of children in care, already one of the highest pro-rata in the country, has continued to rise. The Public Law Outline (PLO) is not being used effectively to either divert children from care or to ensure that when it is no longer safe for children to remain at home, alternative arrangements have been fully explored in advance. As a result, too many children have ended up living in unregulated placements with family or friends that have not been properly assessed beforehand.
- Starting from a very low base, the local authority's determination to eradicate drift and delay in achieving permanence for children in care is evident in the new and strengthened Legal Gateway Planning and Best Practice Scrutiny arrangements. Considerable progress has also been made in discharging from care those children who no longer need to be in care by way of Special Guardianship or Child Arrangement Orders.
- Once in care, good attention is paid to children's physical health. Health assessments are timely. A local solution has recently been found to what has been a national problem, of getting dental checks completed during the pandemic.
- Despite COVID-19, most children are being seen regularly by their social workers, although not always in the case for children living out of area. For some children, constantly having to get to know a new social worker, because their last one has left, is unhelpful.
- Senior leaders have taken appropriate action to improve the impact and effectiveness of the Virtual School.
- While the Looked After Children Attachment Pathway has improved the quality of wrap-around support for children in care, work with CAMHS to improve care leavers' access to mental health services continues. Therapeutic support for some

younger children who have had multiple adverse childhood experiences, making it difficult for them to have any realistic prospect of being able to live successfully with foster families, is also in short supply.

- Despite the pandemic, most children in care have benefited from having regular face-to-face family time, often over and above telephone or virtual contact, with the people who matter most to them. It is difficult to underestimate the significance and importance of this for their mental health and emotional well-being.
- Acting as strong advocates for children in care, Independent Reviewing Officers are increasingly making effective use of the Dispute Resolution Process to challenge poor decision-making and poor practice whenever, and wherever, it occurs.
- Placement sufficiency continues to be extremely problematic, as evidenced by comparatively poor short-term placement stability figures and the number of younger children living in residential children's homes. Senior leaders are taking appropriate action to address these issues.
- Considerable progress has been made in increasing the range of accommodation and employment opportunities available to care leavers. However, this is no consolation to those young people whose pathway plans have not been updated, who have not been seen regularly by their personal advisers, and whose needs and vulnerabilities are not well understood. Action is being taken to strengthen management oversight in this area.
- With the exception of the PLO tracker, which is not fit for purpose, senior leaders have a clear line of sight on the quality and impact of practice with children and families. Comprehensive performance management reports now include extensive commentary and coherent analysis. Audit activity, which is better focused, is underpinned by a determination not to shy away from difficult messages.
- Determined to get the basics right, while laying the foundations for real and sustainable improvement, the local authority has invested in its staff. During the pandemic, it has reached out to its partners and become much more business-like in terms of its approach to practice and performance, governance, scrutiny and accountability.
- While strategic and operational management oversight and grip have been strengthened, and social workers are now getting regular supervision, frontline managers are not consistently providing the right level of critical challenge. The way in which decisions are recorded does not always provide a clear and easy-to-follow 'audit trail'.
- The local authority has made a significant investment in the training and professional development of its managers and staff. Staff are being given the equipment and resources they need, in the form of mobile technology and the roll-out of a new preferred model of social work, to be able to perform to a higher standard of practice. Most staff feel well supported and appreciate the time and effort that senior leaders have taken to keep them safe during COVID-19.

- A significant change in leadership style in children's social care is starting to reap dividends, helping to transform the partnership landscape as evidenced, for example, by Hull's Safeguarding Children Partnership arrangements, which have been refreshed and re-energised.
- Nowhere is this 'transformation' more apparent than in the relationship between the local authority and the Learning Partnership, which represents schools and multi-academy trusts. A previously difficult relationship has become much more positive and productive. Schools are thrilled by the Social Workers in Schools project and the difference this is making to their, and the local authority's, ability to be more proactive, work more closely together and respond more quickly to needs and risks when they first begin to emerge, in ways that benefit children and families.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning your next inspection or visit. I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. It will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Nigel Parkes
Her Majesty's Inspector