

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

Jill McGregor
Corporate Director Children's Services
Trafford Council
Trafford Town Hall
Talbot Road
Stretford
M32 0TH

Dear Jill

Focused visit to Trafford 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 Trafford children's services on 8 and 9 March 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors were Paula Thomson-Jones, Kathryn Grindrod, Julie Knight, Lorna Schlechte and Garry White.

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 local authority staff, carers, key stakeholders and children. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records. 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

- The quality of planning for children, including those subject to pre-proceedings, to prevent drift and delay and to reduce unplanned admissions into care.
- The help given to care leavers to enable them to engage with opportunities for education, employment and training, and the emotional health and well-being support they need to be successful.

- The management oversight of work taking place with children, including by independent chairs and reviewing officers, to ensure that social work practice is timely and of good quality.

Findings

- Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, senior leaders have worked effectively with partners to maintain the provision of services for children in Trafford. In addition to responding to the pandemic, leaders have continued to focus on service improvement by incorporating the changes required into their wider planning. Existing governance arrangements were also enhanced to focus on longer-term strategic progress in addition to the response required for the immediate crisis. Trafford, as part of the Greater Manchester combined local authority area, has experienced periods of higher than average COVID-19 transmission, and, as a result, longer periods of national restrictions and lockdown. It has adapted well to promoting remote working for its staff while also maintaining access to office bases for those who need them.
- Children referred for social work support have their needs considered and responded to in a timely way by a well-organised first response service. For many children, decision-making is based on good information-sharing which leads to the timely provision of relevant help. Decisions for some children are not informed by a thorough consideration of their history or effective evaluation of the information available, and this leads to them being the subject of repeat requests for help and experiencing delay before they receive the right service.
- For some children, being stepped down to early help from the first response service without a social work assessment leads to the delivery of services that are focused solely on the presenting issue. Some early help assessments lack consideration of children's history and their previous experiences and so decisions about the support required are not reliable. When social work assessments have been undertaken, decisions to step down to early help are appropriate and often lead to services that help children and families.
- When children are identified as being at risk of harm, timely action is taken to hold strategy meetings to plan and consider next steps. Poor attendance by partner agencies and a lack of effective information-gathering lead to weak initial decision-making and children being the subject of repeat strategy discussions before well-informed decisions can be made. Although this does not leave children at risk of immediate harm, it does lead to delay in decisions to intervene and provide help for some children.
- Most child protection investigations and assessments are thorough and contain detailed information on children's family history. This results in appropriate decisions for most children. For some children, there is insufficient consideration of immediate safety planning, and for many children little consideration of contingency planning should their situations not improve. This means that when things do not get better for children, or there are further issues, children often experience unplanned emergency intervention.

- Decisions to make children the subject of child in need or child protection plans are appropriate and thresholds are applied effectively. Some children have good-quality assessments of their needs and intervention that improves their situation. For many children, the quality is not as good, and when their situations are not improving there is delay in decisions being made to address this. For some children with complex needs, child in need planning is particularly weak and it is not clear if their needs are being addressed.
- Most children who are the subject of child in need or child protection plans have continued to be seen regularly during the pandemic. Appropriate decisions have been made to see many children face to face and children at higher levels of risk are being seen in person regularly. Some social workers have good relationships with children, but in several teams, this has been undermined by problems with instability in the workforce and many children have experienced several changes in social worker.
- The number of children being electively home educated has risen during the pandemic but remains lower than most other local authorities in the region. There are strong systems in place to enable close monitoring of vulnerable children, including those who have an education, health and care plan. The local authority also made it a priority to identify and support vulnerable pupils who are most at risk of missing education. Strong partnerships have been developed across the local authority and schools to minimise the risks to children and young people who are out of education.
- When children go missing, return home interviews have continued to be undertaken during the pandemic with virtual visits being offered to seek to understand their experiences. The information gathered is not well used to inform children's case planning or help them in the future. When children are at risk of exploitation, direct work from social workers in the specialist complex safeguarding team (SHINE) has a positive impact, with evidence of risks being reduced and well managed.
- When the experience of children does not improve, appropriate decisions are taken to initiate legal planning to support change. Once children are the subject of pre-proceedings, this is not used effectively by the local authority either to support improvement and the appropriate ending of legal action, or to ensure that clear plans are in place prior to an application to the court. Weak management oversight by both front-line and more senior managers means that when there is no progress for children and their lives do not improve, this is not identified or responded to quickly enough.
- For many children, this leads to them coming into care in an unplanned way as the result of urgent situations or incidents. Decisions about placements are, therefore, often made in emergencies and this leads to increased challenges to find suitable places for children to live. Some children experience several changes of placement at an early stage before they can settle. For some other children, when there is time to plan, decision-making about when they come into care and where they live demonstrates better consideration of their wishes and feelings.

- Most children are placed with their brothers and sisters and can see other people who are important to them regularly. For most children, decisions regarding arrangements for family time during the pandemic have been well informed, with some children having face-to-face visits and others seeing family virtually, or a combination of both.
- Most children in care have been well supported with their learning throughout the pandemic. The virtual school has been effective in identifying vulnerable children and ensuring that there is good joint working between itself, schools and carers. This has led to good levels of attendance at school and additional help for children and carers to enable more effective opportunities for home learning.
- Support from the virtual school for children over the age of 16 is not as strong or established as for younger children. Some targeted intervention was undertaken recently as a response to the impact of COVID-19 and this has significantly improved the number of Year 11 pupils moving on to education, employment or training. Overall, the support for children and young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) remains too variable and 57% of all care leavers are NEET.
- Partners are providing a wide range of interventions to support children with their emotional health and well-being during the pandemic. Some children have received additional services, including, as part of early help, intervention in schools, and additional services to care leavers. However, some care leavers told inspectors that the level of help they receive is not good and does not help them with their emotional health and well-being or to prepare them for independence. For some young people, mental health support takes too long to access.
- Decision-making for care leavers does not lead to positive outcomes for some young people. Some care leavers do well, and they continue to live with foster carers, or in suitable accommodation with good support, which helps them maintain education or employment. Others experience planning for them that lacks ambition and is too focused on finding practical solutions to immediate needs, such as housing, rather than exploring the barriers to engaging young people in education, employment and training that will really make a difference for their futures.
- In most areas of service, management oversight by front-line and middle managers is not providing enough quality assurance or challenge to ensure that social work practice is of the best possible standard for children. In addition, those who chair child protection conferences do not routinely check on progress of children's plans between meetings, and do not identify and challenge when work is not progressing. The footprint of independent reviewing officers (IROs) is more evident on children's records, with examples of IROs routinely completing mid-review monitoring of progress.
- Quality assurance activity is now embedded in the service but has not translated into consistent improvement in social work practice. Some audits remain too focused on checking compliance rather than evaluating the quality of the practice or the impact that it is having on children. Over the last four months, stronger

systems to evaluate audit work have led to regular reports that provide detailed and accurate information about audit findings.

- During this visit, inspectors found a developing culture of leaders and staff being open to learning and welcoming of any feedback that would support practice improvement. Prior to this visit, senior leaders presented a comprehensive self-assessment that demonstrated that they now have a more accurate understanding of the quality of the services that children currently receive. They also understand the significant amount of development that is required to improve social work practice with children and their families.
- Most staff spoken to during this visit were positive about working for Trafford and report feeling well supported during the pandemic. Although workloads are manageable, there remain significant challenges to recruitment and retention to stabilise the workforce. One third of current social workers are agency workers and staff turnover has increased over the last six months. Some key actions to address workforce issues, such as the appointment of other key posts within the senior leadership team and a planned restructure of children's services, were delayed due to the pandemic. Most senior leaders are now in place and formal consultation for the redesign of the service is due to take place immediately following this visit.

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

Paula Thomson-Jones
Her Majesty's Inspector