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Amanda Lewis  
Corporate Director, Children, Families and Education  
Luton Borough Council  
Town Hall  
Upper George Street  
Luton  
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Dear Ms Lewis,

### **Focused visit to Luton 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 Luton children's services on 28 and 29 April 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors were Margaret Burke, Amanda Maxwell, Chris Stevens, Dominic Stevens and Tom Anthony.

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 and telephone calls for discussions with local authority staff, managers and leaders. The lead inspector and the director of children's services agreed arrangements to deliver this remote 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**

- Signposting and referrals on to other support services for children and families who do not meet the criteria for formal support from children's social care following an assessment.
- Using case planning and reviews for children within child in need and child protection core group meetings to their full advantage, to drive progress and hold partners, as well as family members, to account for the completion of actions.

- Assessments and care planning, to better consider children's identities and diverse needs as well as their vulnerabilities, so that these case records reflect how all their unique needs are to be met, alongside efforts to minimise harm.
- Placement planning decisions and records, to make clear the reasons for determining the placement chosen for the child and how the placement will meet the child's needs.
- Placements of children in the care of extended family or with friends, to ensure that carers are all appropriately assessed and children's placements are correctly formalised and supported.
- The earlier appointment of personal advisers for all eligible children, to build more effective relationships and support through their transition to adulthood.

## **Findings**

- COVID-19 has had a serious impact on Luton's very diverse community, including on many in the children's workforce. The pandemic has also brought huge financial challenges, with significant losses in council income. Leaders across the council have pulled together effectively, preventing a more severe budget crisis and prioritising support for children's services. Partnerships have strengthened. Politicians, senior officers, partner agencies and business leaders have worked together to ensure support for the most vulnerable.
- There has been an increase in safeguarding activity, with more children with complex needs referred for support in the last six months. Timely oversight of contacts coming into the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) helps to ensure that children's circumstances are appropriately assessed. Social workers in the MASH work well with other professionals to gain an understanding of children's needs and to ensure the right support is put in place. Most decisions are timely and lead to the right response.
- Safeguarding concerns are recognised. Strategy discussions take place promptly when children may be at risk of significant harm. While these are not consistently attended by all relevant agencies, they are informed by relevant information. Decisions to progress to a child protection investigation, to initiate work with families under a child in need plan or to proceed to an initial child protection conference are evidence-based and appropriate.
- The effectiveness of ongoing work with children who are subject to child in need or child protection planning is variable. There is evidence of productive and collaborative working with families, through family network meetings, child protection core groups and child in need meetings. However, professionals are not using these to their full advantage, to drive progress and hold partners, as well as family members, to account for their actions.
- Issues of diversity are not consistently given sufficient weight or consideration in children's assessments, planning and reviews. Thus, some children's needs are not being fully addressed within their plans.

- Decisions for children who are supported by the children with disabilities team appropriately balance needs arising from their disabilities and those that relate to safeguarding and wider welfare issues. Interventions positively address disability needs through strong packages of short breaks, direct payments and health-brokered support. Where relevant, staff work successfully alongside domestic abuse services and within the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline, to help maintain children safely within their families.
- Leaders work effectively with education services to identify and support children who are missing from education and children who, because of the pandemic, are stuck abroad. Because of COVID-19, there has been a big increase in the number of children electively home educated. Leaders have worked with determination to safeguard their welfare and ensure they receive appropriate education and are supported to return to school.
- Action to strengthen the response to children whose needs relate to criminal and sexual exploitation, gang affiliation and going missing is helping to reduce risk and harm. There is good awareness of these issues among professionals, who use appropriate risk assessment tools, and mechanisms such as the national referral mechanism, to tackle risk.
- The local authority is acting to improve social work for children in pre-proceedings and proceedings. A new gateway panel is helping leaders focus on work with families that had not been progressing as swiftly as it should. The arrangements model more effective scrutiny and direction, but more progress is needed to identify families sooner who would benefit from this work.
- Leaders have strengthened decision-making for children on the edge of care, responding to concerns identified at the last inspection for homeless 16- and 17-year-olds. These vulnerable adolescents now have quicker access to assessments. They benefit from the expertise of housing workers embedded in social work assessment teams. However, when the threshold for accommodation is not met children are not routinely referred on to other community services to meet their remaining needs.
- Decision-making for children coming into care is mostly timely and appropriate in response to safeguarding concerns. Children's case records, however, do not always reflect a clear rationale for the choice of placement. For the most recent entries into care, there has been suitable consideration of formal interventions through legal planning meetings, legal gateway meetings and applications to court. However, viability assessments and support for children and carers are not always appropriately formalised when children are placed within family settings.
- Children in care and care leavers speak positively about their placements and the care arrangements made for them. Children's services' engagement with housing services has been particularly successful in helping care leavers access suitable accommodation.
- Social workers and personal advisers have maintained contact with children in care and care leavers, despite the constraints imposed by the pandemic.

Children's experience of the help they receive has been variable. While the local authority is gradually improving the stability of the workforce, some children still report changes of social workers or personal advisers, making it difficult for them to build trusting relationships with them. This, however, was often mitigated through positive relationships and support from their carers. Personal advisers do not become involved soon enough with children in care. This limits opportunities for young people to build early relationships with their new personal adviser and for early consideration of the options available to them as they transition into adulthood.

- Children in care are supported well to maintain relationships with their parents. Careful consideration is given to the best way to ensure safe and meaningful family time. Social workers generally involve parents well in assessments and decisions about their children. Engagement with children to ascertain their views is evident, although not all fully participate in decision-making that affects them.
- Children in care are well supported by professionals to access community healthcare services. Performance for the timely completion of health assessments is improving. Access through the virtual school to specialist help is promoting children's well-being and engagement in education. Access to mental health support for care leavers is less well defined.
- At the time of this visit, no children were identified as living in an unregistered children's home and those in unregulated provision had placements which appeared to meet their needs. However, the reason a particular placement is chosen for a child and how it would meet their needs is not always clear.
- The virtual school has sustained positive links with providers to support the educational progress of children in care. Throughout the pandemic, all children in care and care leavers have received laptops and, where needed, internet connectivity to support their learning.
- Children in care who do not attend mainstream schooling receive appropriate education courses that support their re-engagement with education. Alternative education placements are carefully selected. Exclusions are low, with no permanent exclusions for children in care in the last three years.
- Leaders are improving help for older care leavers to secure and sustain education, employment and training, including through a guaranteed interview scheme and council mentoring.
- Luton children's services has embraced support from a range of internal and external partners. These partners are well engaged in the council's improvement agenda and committed to the delivery of services. While progress is evident, leaders are fully aware that they still have more work to do to ensure services are at the standard they require.
- Leaders have worked collaboratively with the workforce to improve the quality of frontline practice. A new practice framework provides greater clarity and focus for social work, supporting learning and helping to drive improvement. Changes in

culture, more accessible senior managers and regular communication are viewed positively by staff. Leaders and practitioners recognise there is more to do to embed stronger practice.

- Performance is regularly reviewed. Leaders' commitment to shaping an effective auditing process is evident. However, difficulties achieving a shared understanding of what good practice looks like mean the current auditing arrangements do not yet provide a reliable line of sight to frontline work.
- Steps to create a permanent, stable workforce are beginning to produce good results. Reductions in social workers' caseloads have given children more time with professionals. Leaders recognise the need for a continued focus in this area. Some children still face many changes of social worker, and higher caseloads in some teams make it harder to form effective and supportive relationships. Changes in team managers have also affected the continuity of oversight for children, although some progress has been made here too.
- Most social workers receive regular supervision, but it is not always sufficiently thorough or challenging to drive good case progression. Leaders are aware of the work that still needs to be done on this. They have instituted structures to strengthen service management oversight and line management arrangements, while training and development of team managers continues.

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

Margaret Burke  
Her Majesty's Inspector