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Dear Mr Gregg

Focused visit to Coventry 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 Coventry City Council's children's services on 12 and 13 May 2021. The visit was carried out by Her Majesty's Inspectors John Roughton, Rachel Griffiths, Tara Geere, Alex Dignan and Stephen Bentham.

The methodology for this visit was in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. The methodology was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 context. This visit was carried out largely on site, although remotely for the School HMI. Video calls were used for some discussions with social workers, managers, leaders, partners, carers and children. 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 timeliness of decision-making for children to enter the Public Law Outline (PLO), and their circumstances being purposefully progressed once within it.
- The quality of supervision, management oversight and case notes so that the rationale for decisions made is clearly recorded.
- Decision-making and the recording of rationale with respect to children's placements.

Findings

- Strong, timely and effective political and corporate support for children's services has enabled leaders to respond promptly to mitigate the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additional financial investment from the council supported the entire workforce as it moved unexpectedly to working online. Leaders have ensured that the most vulnerable children have been seen in person, and staff have been provided with personal protective equipment to facilitate this. Local authority leaders have ensured that children in care, both those living in Coventry and those living outside the city, are provided with the technology and access to tuition and education where possible.
- A well-coordinated effort by the multi-agency partnership has identified and effectively supported the most vulnerable children. Partners have maintained their oversight of children's safety and well-being. This oversight has covered those children being home educated and/or at risk of missing education.
- Partnership working in Coventry has strengthened during the pandemic. A culture focused on overcoming shared obstacles has developed and resulted in positive change. For example, there has been a concerted effort made by the child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) partnership to rapidly establish a 24-hour crisis helpline. In addition, the community-based Navigation Hubs have ensured a prompt response to all mental health referrals and wider support needs.
- Decision-making by team managers in the multi-agency safeguarding hub is timely. Managers identify clear actions for staff and there is an effective system to review children's needs and monitor their progress. Parental consent for checks is clearly recorded, as is the rationale for overriding this if the child's safety warrants this.
- Strategy meetings are held promptly. They are well attended by partners and attendance has been enhanced during the pandemic through virtual meetings. Although actions are not always explicitly time-bound, decisions are appropriately reached and swiftly progressed to ensure that children are afforded protection.
- Child protection investigations provide evidence of good use of children's histories and information from partners to inform decision-making. Children are seen promptly to inform investigations and assess immediate risks.
- Most children subject to a child in need or child protection plan are seen by social workers within appropriate timescales according to their needs. Face-to-face visits have continued during the pandemic, subject to risk assessment. Core groups, child protection and child in need reviews are held regularly and are mostly well attended by partner agencies. While plans are regularly updated, they are not consistently child-focused, time-bound or specific enough to address all presenting risks and needs for children.

- Decision-making with respect to children stepped down to or up from early help is appropriate. There is clear rationale and sign-off recorded of managers' decisions, which ensures that children and families receive a proportionate and timely service in response to assessed need.
- Some children at risk of sexual and criminal exploitation are not assessed soon enough. Repeated episodes of going missing by children do not always trigger a strategy discussion. Risk assessment tools are not always completed when risks emerge. Although children are offered return home interviews, the quality of these is variable and many do not assist workers to manage presenting risks.
- When concerns regarding children's safety escalate, for too many children there is either delay in escalation or a missed opportunity for them to receive support within the pre-proceedings framework. Most letters before proceedings to parents lack focus on the impact on children of the concerns raised and what needs to change.
- Leaders understand the areas for improvement needed with respect to pre-proceedings work in Coventry and have an action plan in place. They recognise the need to improve the consistency and quality of work prior to, and within pre-proceedings, to ensure that more children and families have the very best opportunity to remain together safely without prolonged court intervention and prevent an unplanned entry into care where concerns escalate to a crisis.
- Decisions taken for children to enter care are proportionate to their need. Some children enter care in an unplanned way and later than they should due to lack of pre-proceedings work. Most children in care live in stable placements that meet their needs. Where children have experienced placement moves during the pandemic, the rationale for decisions to end placements is clearly recorded. However, it is not always clear what steps were taken to seek to prevent placements from ending.
- When children move into unregulated provision, risk assessments with respect to the placement are not routinely reviewed or updated, meaning that associated risks for children may not be fully understood or mitigated.
- The rationale for matching of new placements or decisions to move children is not consistently recorded. If accessing their files later in life, care experienced adults would not be able to understand why social workers and managers made decisions about why they needed to move.
- Regular reviews take place for children in care, and independent reviewing officers' oversight helps to support the progress of plans. Care plans vary in quality. Some lack specific actions and timescales for completion, and they are not always written for children. Health issues are well considered, and appropriate access to CAMHS services has been enabled and enhanced through the pandemic. Transition planning for disabled children who are approaching adulthood starts too late regarding their care, education and support needs.

- The arrangements in place for children to see their family and friends are well considered and risk-assessed in accordance with the child's needs.
- The virtual school acted swiftly at the start of the first national lockdown to work with school leaders to protect vulnerable children. Children in care have been supported effectively to continue to access education throughout the pandemic.
- Foster carers are very positive about the support they have received during the pandemic, in particular the help from the virtual school to support children's education, with access to laptops and learning resources.
- Care leavers benefit from established relationships with workers who know them well. During the pandemic, they have received additional support and contact to ensure that they are safe, well and not isolated. Care leavers have been seen face to face, enabled to join socially distanced activities and offered access to a 'meals-on-wheels' service to ensure that they are well fed. Care leavers have been provided with devices for online access during the pandemic so that they can continue their studies or seek relevant training or employment.
- Leaders are raising care leavers' aspirations by showcasing their achievements. Links are well established with universities and apprenticeship providers to ensure that these options are available. During the pandemic, many young people have moved into education, employment and training (EET) due to the work of an EET panel.
- Quality assurance of practice, with case file and thematic auditing, is well embedded in Coventry and has continued throughout the pandemic. However, audits identify that practice for children is too often not effective in improving children's circumstances. Audit activity could be strengthened by directly auditing alongside social workers, which is a missed opportunity to identify strengths and areas to support practice. Turnover in the workforce has hampered efforts to embed practice improvement.
- Some children have experienced too many changes of social worker, which has delayed the progression of their plans. Direct work is not always completed in a timely manner due to the time it takes for children and social workers to build new relationships. The recruitment of a permanent and stable workforce remains a high priority for leaders.
- Most social workers receive regular supervision, although its quality, impact and recording are variable. Managers' oversight is present on most children's files, but actions are not always clearly recorded or tracked to completion.
- Staff are positive about working in Coventry. They say that their workload is manageable, and they have valued the support and communication provided by leaders and managers at all levels during the pandemic.
- Children spoken to say that leaders are visible, and they have valued the support offered to them throughout the pandemic.

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

Yours sincerely,

John Roughton
Her Majesty's Inspector