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Dear Mr Carlton

Focused visit to North Yorkshire County Council 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 North Yorkshire children's services on 16 June 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Lynn Radley and Matt Reed.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for the front door, including contacts, referrals, decision-making and the application of thresholds for services and accommodation of children. They also looked at assessments and plans for children in need and those subject to child protection processes, which included the designated officer arrangements.

This visit was carried out 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. 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. This visit was carried out partly by remote means. Both inspectors were on site and held face-to-face discussions with some local authority staff. However, inspectors also used video calls for discussions with local authority staff, managers and leaders.

Headline findings

Highly confident senior leaders and managers have ensured that children's services have continued to develop positively since the last inspection. Despite COVID-19 and the resultant increase in the number of children being referred to children's services,

partnership work has flourished, the practice model is now fully embedded, and vulnerable children receive effective services from skilled and compassionate professionals who protect, help and support them.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice?

- The recording of how and when actions to progress children's plans are undertaken and completed.

Main findings

A stable senior leadership team has been able to respond confidently to the additional challenges brought by COVID-19. Well-established governance arrangements, management oversight and strong partnership arrangements have ensured that oversight of vulnerable children has been maintained. Workers have responded well to new working arrangements, and performance has continued to be strong.

All contacts are received and screened by the highly efficient and effective multi-agency safeguarding team (MAST). This well-staffed team includes managers and social workers from children's social care, the early help service, health and the police. Much work, time and resources have been invested in ensuring that MAST practice is delivered within the parameters of the authority's chosen practice model.

MAST practice is of a high standard, and skilled managers and staff screen contacts and referrals and make appropriate decisions about next steps within a 24-hour timeframe. Responsive managers review, update and reassess children's cases as new information emerges and referrals progress without delay. This includes scaling risks and strengths in line with their practice model. The early-help manager oversees the purposeful screening and assessment of cases referred to her service. Social workers and early-help workers undertake wide-ranging evaluations of each child's circumstances, and these underpin the rationale for cases being allocated to the right service to meet that child's needs. All referrals to children's social care are appropriately prioritised using a red, amber or green (RAG) rating system.

Managers provide clear direction to workers at all stages of the process, ensuring that the correct checks are completed without delay. Sufficient information is available and collated to inform and allow robust decision-making to take place.

Issues of parental consent are well understood, and when managers decide to dispense with consent this is clearly recorded on the referral record. The MAST effectively and promptly screens children's cases when a child's needs escalate or reduce (to step across to another statutory team or step down to early help), and a decision is made to move their case into another part of the service. Decisions made in the MAST are proportionate to the concerns raised, and the rationale for decisions

is clearly recorded. Good-quality management oversight in the team is a strength, and this is reinforced by detailed recording of the rationale for their decisions.

The MAST has embedded and routinely uses multi-agency live mapping to provide an extra and theoretically based structured consideration of the circumstances of individual children and their families. A wholly child-focused approach is used in order to identify what needs to happen to move to the best or a better way to progress a child's case and maximise the potential for a more positive outcome. This time- and resource-intensive process allows staff and managers to take time to stop, think collaboratively and use all resources available to them to plan a way forward.

When a child is thought to be at risk of significant harm, their circumstances are considered at prompt and highly effective child protection strategy meetings. These meetings are routinely attended by a wide range of relevant agencies that contribute and share information fully. All partner agencies are required to provide a risk scaling, so that a shared understanding of risk informs the assessment of risk and any subsequent child protection investigation. This means that next steps can be planned and put into action without delay. The recording of strategy meetings is of a high standard, is very clear and sets out the rationale and timescale for each agency's actions.

Child protection investigations are comprehensive, recorded to the highest standards and completed without any delay. The range of partner agencies that contribute is wide and diverse, demonstrating that social workers have a comprehensive understanding of a child's networks and circumstances to inform their recommendation for what should happen next. Management decisions to progress children's cases to an initial child protection case conference are appropriate and clearly recorded.

Children's views are included and well detailed in child and family assessments. Most children's case records evidenced individualised and regular direct work being undertaken with children. Social workers take the views of children seriously, and these views inform the recommendations of assessments and the provision of further services. Assessments are concise, presented in alignment with the authority's practice model and always include scaling and statements clarifying what is of concern and what strengths can be used to mitigate them. Assessments are completed at a pace that is in line with each child's particular circumstances. Management oversight is robust, and, in every case, the authorising manager sets out the rationale for their decision.

Assessments for court are well written, have the needs of the child as their prime focus and demonstrate the flexibility of social workers to adapt to a different assessment style. Examples seen included a wide consideration of historical factors, a detailed account of the child's views and an extensive analysis of concerns and strengths.

Most child in need and child protection plans would benefit from the addition of clear timescales for actions to be completed. Better plans are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time bound (SMART) and include dates for actions to be completed by rather than the use of 'ongoing', for example. Social workers are in no doubt about what a child's plan is and how much progress has been made or what the barriers to progress are. Children's case records also demonstrate that core groups, teams around the child and reviews all measure and record progress against the plan's objectives.

Numbers of children entering care are low as a result of the time, extensive support services and resources used to maintain children within their family networks whenever it is possible. In the last year, there have been only two incidences when emergency orders were used, and these were appropriate. When children need to be taken into care, senior managers and staff act decisively and make prompt applications to issue court proceedings where necessary. For example, when a child's case is already subject to the Public Law Outline and where extensive support services have not improved children's circumstances, managers act without delay to make successful application to the court. An established process of authorisation and scrutiny by senior managers is in place to ensure that the right children are accommodated.

When it is alleged that adults in positions of trust have harmed children, the designated officer service takes appropriate action to ensure that children are safeguarded and that the allegation is investigated and followed up by the designated officer.

Social workers are positive about working in North Yorkshire. They talked positively about the support provided to deliver the service in line with the practice model. Child-centred work is key to what they do. The majority we met like working from home and the increased use of virtual meetings and discussions. Others miss the 'buzz' of an office and having colleagues on hand for informal and spontaneous conversations. Supervision is routine, helpful and undertaken both in groups and individually.

Confident, skilled leaders and managers know their help and protection service very well and respond quickly and effectively to emerging issues, rise in demand or change in workforce patterns. They have created a service in which social workers are supported to develop their initiative, be imaginative and help families build safe networks to raise children. Cases demonstrate improvement in outcomes for most children, and only low numbers need to be accommodated. Since the last inspection, the practice model has become well embedded, not only at the heart of local authority children's services but in the practice of partners. Regular practice-led learning and assurance are undertaken within the structure of a comprehensive quality assurance framework. Performance against key indicators used to measure

the impact that services have on improving children's welfare is good or better, and robust management oversight is consistently evident in children's cases.

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

Your sincerely

Lynn Radley
Her Majesty's Inspector