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Dear Ms Turner,

Monitoring visit of Kingston Upon Hull City Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Kingston Upon Hull City Council children's services on 30 June 2021. The visit was the third monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in May 2019. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Caroline Walsh and Vicky Metheringham.

The local authority is making steady progress in improving services for its children and young people in need of help or protection.

Areas covered by the visit

During this on-site visit, inspectors reviewed the progress being made for children in need and those subject to a child protection plan.

Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including children's electronic case records, performance management information, case file audits and other information provided by senior leaders. In addition, inspectors spoke to a range of staff, including political members, managers, independent reviewing officers, social workers and practitioners.

Overview

A committed and increasingly stable senior leadership team has successfully led children's services through the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic. Families in need of help and protection have continued to benefit from frequent support from staff who have been creative in how they have maintained contact with children, ensuring that they continue to be helped. The wide-ranging and comprehensive improvement plan is in progress. Political and corporate support for children's services is high. Leaders have responded quickly to the increased pressures created by the extra demand for services, which has led to high caseloads. Additional resources have been provided to bring in a temporary experienced team of social workers to accelerate the process for more children in need to move to early help services.

Children in need of help and protection continue to receive a variable level of support, but more children now benefit from child-focused, responsive practice which is more ambitious for them. For a few children, inspectors saw poorer recognition of needs and a delay in their circumstances improving. This is most evident where children have experienced too many changes of social worker and where there is weaker management oversight to ensure that plans progress.

Workforce stability has improved, although recently there has been a higher turnover in agency and permanent staff which has impeded some children's progress. A new organisational culture of staff engagement and 'shout outs' celebrating good work is improving staff morale.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Since the last inspection, considerable financial investment from the council has contributed to steady progress in improving services for children. This is led by a committed Director of Children's Services (DCS) with a stronger management team who are relentless in their desire to see children experience more consistent practice that is responsive and improves their lives. Corporate and political support has improved governance. More oversight panels and scrutiny have been introduced, which includes the involvement of the new portfolio holder for children's services. Improvement plans are due to be refreshed this summer as leaders take stock to ensure that improvement activities consistently translate to better practice with children and their families.

While the pandemic has inevitably delayed some of the improvement work, the senior leadership team has remained focused on delivering its plans. COVID-19 continues to adversely impact services in Hull. Not all partner agencies are back in their offices and there have been changes to the way their services are offered. Thresholds for accessing services are not universally understood by staff and partner agencies. As a result, activity in the Early Help and Safeguarding Hub has increased, and this has slowed down the timeliness of decision-making when concerns are first reported. Senior managers have plans to address this capacity issue and the DCS is leading work with the safeguarding partnerships to improve their joint responses to domestic abuse and neglect.

Children's assessments and plans are not consistently strong, but they are improving in quality. Too many assessments focus on the needs of parents without identifying what needs to change for children, leading to weaker decision-making. Some plans do not address all the areas of risk or identify interventions that would reduce risk to children. Assessments are taking longer, and this delays the help provided to children. Plans would benefit from being clearer about the support to be offered to families, particularly the visiting pattern families should expect from social workers. Inspectors saw drift on occasion due to the lack of clear timescales and review of progress.

Social workers in locality teams visit families frequently and develop positive relationships with children and families. Most visits are purposeful and child focused.

Regular core groups or network meetings demonstrate a high level of understanding of children's different needs. Social workers are ambitious for children, working persistently to secure a wide range of help and resources which are making a difference to children's lives. This is helping to address some of the longstanding neglect that children have experienced and compensates for some of the shortfalls in assessments and plans.

Specialist commissioned services, including domestic abuse, alcohol and substance misuse, and work with perpetrators of sexual abuse, are used effectively. These are instrumental in some of the improvements seen in families' lives. Children are also benefiting from an improved edge of care service, Connect, which supports families to safely care for their own children.

Child protection rates are increasing. Not all these plans are necessary and too many end at the first review. The increased demand for child protection conferences has stretched capacity, which hampers independent chairs from being able to escalate concerns and ensure timely progress of plans. Initial conferences are increasingly untimely, which is concerning as it delays partner agencies formulating multi-agency plans to keep children safe.

Some children experience too many changes in social worker which has impeded their progress and resulted in drift and delay in their circumstances improving. For a small group of children, optimistic planning and progress reviews have perpetuated a cycle of repeated referrals, child protection investigations and plans and, on occasion, repeat public law outline (PLO) interventions. These children have not received the right help at the right time and have lost faith in social workers, which makes it harder to help them each successive time.

Since the pandemic, child protection chairs have been holding virtual multi-agency meetings and seeing improved attendance at conferences. There has generally been good partner engagement in children's plans. However, health partners have been challenged by sickness and capacity issues, which means that they do not always send the allocated worker to the meeting and reports are not always provided. This hinders effective information sharing and, for a small number of morbidly obese children, has resulted in delays to the right help being offered.

The concerted efforts to improve the tracking and effectiveness of pre-proceedings work is resulting in more timely escalation of concerns and assessment of risk for many children. The new court case manager is making a difference helping to build confidence and expertise in staff, and this is leading to better-quality PLO letters and agreements with families. As a result, more families have been supported to move out of PLO as their children's situations improve. However, inspectors saw some premature step downs where changes had not been sustained and children continued to experience longstanding neglect and repeated cycles of social work involvement.

Supervision does not always provide the direction and critical challenge that workers need to ensure that risks to children are identified, the cumulative effect of neglect

is understood, and that children's circumstances routinely improve. Where teams are stable, there is stronger team management and supervision and workers receive critical challenge and clear case direction. Not all management oversight is recorded in children's files, but inspectors saw children benefiting from timely decision-making and plans progressing appropriately. Scrutiny panels are increasing the oversight of children who experience long periods of intervention and are contributing to step down plans. The revised child in need panel offers an extra level of support to help staff feel confident in their decision-making.

Quality assurance activities are prioritised and involve senior leaders. Audit completion rates are high. However, it is unclear what impact these are having on raising practice standards or improving children's outcomes. Not all auditors have a consistent understanding of practice standards. Improvements identified from audits are not routinely implemented by workers. Leaders acknowledge that the programme needs to be reviewed to ensure that not only are actions implemented, but also that it provides succinct messages to promote learning and improve practice quality. The roll out of the signs of safety model is continuing, but it is too early for inspectors to evaluate its effect.

Caseloads are currently high due to significant increases in activity since 2019 and this has impacted on performance measures such as timeliness of children being seen. Offices are open for staff on a rota basis and the continued use of technology and virtual meetings has contributed to staff feeling supported to work safely during the pandemic. There have been efficiencies as travel has reduced and staff told inspectors that this gave them additional time to visit children and families.

Leaders have committed to extensive plans to improve the recruitment and retention of social workers. A pathway review is currently underway, which has led to some anxiety for staff about changing teams and manager. This move has released capacity to employ a further 19.5 social worker posts. This should reduce caseloads and support team managers as practice leads and practice educator staff are recruited. Managers have extensive plans for in-house development of social workers including apprenticeships, step-up programmes, and a social work academy. Inspectors saw strong practice in newly qualified social workers as well as agency staff, which demonstrates the high-quality recruitment and support for new staff.

Social workers are working hard to support children in Hull and are appreciative of the support that managers and teams provide. Staff morale is improving.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website

Yours sincerely

Caroline Walsh
Her Majesty's Inspector