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Dear Amanda,

Monitoring visit of Luton Borough Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Luton Borough Council children's services on 28 and 29 July 2021. This was the third visit since services were judged inadequate in January 2020. Her Majesty's Inspectors were Margaret Burke and Louise Hollick.

The COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic has continued to have a detrimental impact on Luton's communities, workforce and services. Despite significant challenges, leaders have remained focused and have continued to address the weaknesses identified in previous visits. Progress has been made, but inconsistencies remaining in social work practice and management oversight limit the impact of the improvements made for some children.

Areas covered by the visit

During this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made for children in care. They focused on:

- the quality of matching, placement and decision-making for children in care;
- the experiences and progress of disabled children in care;
- and the experiences and progress of children living in unregulated and/or unregistered provision.

Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, supervision notes, case management records, performance data, audits and progress reports. In addition, they spoke to a range of staff including managers and social workers. They also spoke to children in care and their carers.

Overview

The local authority has continued to make moderate progress in improving its services for children and young people. Leaders have increased the number of social workers and managers, with some impact on reducing social workers' caseloads. Progress has been made in specific areas of practice identified for attention at previous inspection visits. For children in care, the actions leaders have taken to improve services mean that more children are now in stable, long-term placements and the proportion of children in local placements is increasing. The timeliness of initial health assessments has started to improve.

However, action planning has not yet fully translated into a positive impact in all areas of frontline work with children. The quality of social work practice is still too variable, so that assessments are not routinely updated, planning for some children lacks specificity and management oversight is still not consistently effective. Some progress has been curtailed by the continuing challenges involved in recruiting and maintaining an experienced and stable body of frontline social work staff.

Leaders recognise and understand the challenges they face in improving services for children and families. This is well reflected in their self-assessment. They have further developed their quality assurance processes. They have comprehensive plans in place and continue to take action to address the areas highlighted for improvement.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Leaders have strengthened their oversight of children subject to the Public Law Outline processes and those subject to care proceedings. Weekly legal gateway meetings have improved senior managers' oversight of social work practice and the consistency of decision-making. Leaders track progression of actions to avoid drift and delay, and they authorise plans for children to come into care when it is in the children's best interests to do so.

When children need to become looked after due to an emergency, and they are not previously known to the local authority, staff take prompt action to ensure their safety. They work quickly and sensitively to move children to homes where their immediate needs are met. They give respectful consideration to parents' views and consent. Social workers consider the new edge of care service for support, but the response is not currently swift enough to react to all crisis situations.

The local authority seeks suitable placements for children with complex needs who are facing additional risks from extra-familial harm. When this has been challenging, leaders have maintained oversight of these children. Staff have put in place extensive multi-agency packages of support for them, wrapped around the care of the child in their home. This approach mitigates and manages risks until a suitable

placement is found. Despite this, there have been gaps in some of this work, particularly with one child in this situation.

Children's assessments are not consistently updated when their circumstances or needs change, to ensure the support they receive is well matched to their current needs. Their case records do not always explain the reasons for decisions to bring them into care. This means that some children records are missing significant information about their life events.

While pressures remain in finding suitable placements for children with the most complex needs, good provision is available for most children who require foster care, residential care or independent living placements. Placements are appropriately matched to children's needs. No children from Luton are placed in unregistered placements. Most children in care live in or near enough to Luton to continue in their education and maintain their links with their families and their local areas. Children report feeling safe, loved and well cared for. Carers demonstrate huge commitment. They work hard to nurture the children in their care, helping them to make good progress. They support them with family time, with their education and to help them pursue their hobbies and interests. Children spoke about their carers positively and gave examples of how the care they receive has improved their lives: 'I can talk to my carers about any worries'; 'I feel safe and well cared for'; 'I am better able to sleep' and, 'My behaviour has improved'.

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are placed with suitable placement providers who are attentive to their needs. Their cultural and religious needs are identified and addressed. Children are quickly provided with support to access English as a second language. They are promptly referred for specialist support with their asylum claims and for mental health support, if required. Staff and carers help these children make safe connections within the local community.

Children are benefiting from a better understanding of their race, culture and identity needs. This was an area identified for improvement at the last focused visit. The local authority has acted to increase workers' awareness and understanding. Children's vulnerabilities, identities and diverse needs are now routinely considered and sensitively addressed in planning for them and in their placement reviews. Leaders recognise they have more to do to ensure that this focus and sensitivity is recognised and acted on by all workers for all children in their care.

Disabled children benefit from good placements with skilled carers who meet their complex needs and are committed to their long-term care. These carers also provide substantial support to parents. Social workers have knowledge of basic Makaton and the Picture Exchange Communication System and often use a variety of methods to communicate with children. However, not all workers are able to communicate confidently with children, particularly those who have highly complex needs and, as a consequence, they rely heavily on schools, parents and others to act as an intermediary. As a result, a small number of children miss out on direct work with their social workers which could help them make their wishes and feelings known and ensure that their views are translated into their plans.

Visits to children are purposeful and regular. Their social workers and independent reviewing officers (IROs) work hard to build effective relationships with them. When appropriate, children are seen alone. Children's views are routinely sought and their wider needs are identified. This includes children's conversations with their IROs prior to their reviews and their participation and involvement in their own care reviews. Children generally spoke positively about their social workers. However, many were concerned that their social workers kept changing. One child said: 'First they went off sick, or on holiday, and then they never came back.' Frequent changes of social worker have had a negative impact on some children, particularly when their conversations with social workers have not translated into working plans or identified actions have not been followed through. Leaders are aware of the impact of social worker changes. Routine audits have shown that the strengths of children's relationships with their social workers are not always reflected in case records.

Most children have an up-to-date care plan. Some plans are ill defined, with actions and goals that are too broad and lacking timescales for review, so that it is not always clear whether actions have been completed to an appropriate timescale. When this is the case, it is harder to drive plans forward for children, particularly where they are affected by changes of social worker or first-line manager. Leaders recognise this is an area which requires further improvement and progress is being monitored in improvement plans.

Leaders have improved children's placement stability, with more children remaining long term with their carers. However, planning for children who will remain in care long term is not consistently focused on permanence decisions. This is especially significant for children in residential care or independent living placements, as their plans do not always make it clear to them what will happen as they move into adulthood. The lack of clarity about permanence affects children's well-being and emotional stability.

The local authority has improved the delivery of initial health assessments for children when they come into care. This was an area for improvement at the last inspection. Children's physical and mental health needs are identified, addressed and reviewed in collaboration with health professionals.

The local authority is continually strengthening its audit approach as an integral part of its quality assurance framework. Audits are now well integrated into day-to-day social work practice, providing leaders with valuable insight into the quality of frontline practice and helpful learning pointers. Leaders have recognised the need to better include children's views, improve the quality and consistency of auditors' judgements and ensure audit actions are followed through more consistently.

Since the last visit, further progress has been made in building a permanent workforce. Establishment numbers have increased, with the addition of more social workers and managers. The local authority has invested in and developed its support for social workers in their assessed first year in employment. The social work academy offers high-quality training and support to both newly qualified and

experienced social workers. These actions have resulted in lower caseloads for workers across most teams. Leaders recognise that, while they are making some progress and taking steps which should help to further stabilise the workforce of the future, caseloads are still too high for some workers in some teams, and turnover of social workers and first-line managers continue to impact on the quality of practice.

Staff have continued to receive regular supervision, but the quality of the input is still too variable. Written records indicate that managers do not consistently provide effective support, clear direction or sufficient steer. This is compounded when there are changes in managers and social workers, as sound induction processes are not always adhered to and handovers between workers do not consistently take place. This can result in actions for children being missed. Routine audits have detected that the quality and recording of supervision is not yet consistent. Leaders are focused on improving this important area of practice.

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

Yours sincerely

Margaret Burke
Her Majesty's Inspector