

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231
Textphone 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Cathi Hadley
Joint Director of Children's Services, North and West Northants Councils
North Northamptonshire
Kettering
NN16 8TL

Dear Cathi

Monitoring visit to North Northamptonshire local authority children's services

North Northamptonshire and West Northamptonshire Councils replaced Northamptonshire County Council on 1 April 2021, following local government reorganisation. Northamptonshire County Council was judged inadequate for children's social care services in June 2019, and monitoring visits began in January 2020. The Department for Education has decided that the monitoring arrangements that were in place up until 31 March 2021 will continue, and that Ofsted will continue to report on progress against the recommendations made at the 2019 inspection. The two new local authorities have agreed to this approach.

Northamptonshire County Council delegated its children's social care statutory functions and transferred the provision of children's social care services to Northamptonshire Children's Trust on 1 November 2020. Following a statutory direction, North and West Northamptonshire Councils confirmed the delegation as from 1 April 2021, with the trust providing services to both unitary authorities. The trust is a council-owned company, commissioned to provide these services. The commissioning of the services and accountability for the statutory functions are through the Joint Director of Children's Services role.

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to North Northamptonshire local authority children's services on 28 July and 29 July 2021. This is the first monitoring visit to North Northamptonshire, following three visits prior to local government reorganisation. The visit was carried out by Julie Knight, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Brenda McLaughlin, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Throughout the challenges of the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic, senior leaders have continued to focus relentlessly on improving practice. This has resulted in tangible progress, which continues to gain traction in improving the experiences, progress and outcomes for children.

Areas covered by the visit

During this on-site visit, inspectors reviewed the progress for children in need and those subject to a child protection plan. Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, performance management information, case file audits and other information provided by senior leaders. In addition, inspectors spoke to parents and a range of staff, including elected members, managers, child protection conference chairs and social workers.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Children in need and those with a child protection plan are seen regularly by their social workers, both face to face and virtually. This has helped to build relationships with children, enabling them to express their views and wishes, and to talk about what is working well and what is worrying them. Social workers take pride in their work. They show commitment and dedication to supporting children and their families to make positive changes in their lives. Parents who spoke to inspectors said that they are happy with the support that they receive. They have trust in their social worker, which helps to achieve better outcomes for children.

Some children experience too many changes of social worker, making it harder for them to develop trusting, positive relationships. The quality of children's plans and planning is often weaker when there have been several changes of social worker; this results in drift and delay in securing effective change for children. Senior leaders fully recognise the impact of staff changes; current workforce recruitment and retention strategies are gradually improving workforce stability.

The vast majority of children in the safeguarding and support service have an up-to-date assessment that identifies their risks and needs. Stronger assessments capture children's family history and the current concerns effectively. They include a clear rationale for next steps and benefit from management oversight. However, many assessments, including those for disabled children, are weaker and do not sufficiently explore children's unique characteristics, including their ethnicity and culture. Senior leaders have plans in place to improve assessment practice.

Some child in need and child protection plans are unclear about what needs to change to improve children's circumstances. Stronger plans are succinct and outcome focused, but overall the quality is too variable. Many plans are not realistic in their expectations of what parents can achieve; they are too focused on parental needs, and some 'danger statements' regarding concerns are too long, meaning that the impact is lost. The strengths-based model of practice is helping to inform children's assessments and plans; however, it is not yet embedded into practice.

Many children have a safety plan in place, created following a family network meeting. Some children have their own child-friendly safety plan so that they know what to do if they need help. However, some safety plans are not sufficiently robust; they do not always include the full network of people who can offer support, or explicit contingency arrangements.

Many disabled children in need are receiving support at the right threshold. If risks to children increase, cases are stepped up to child protection intervention. Some disabled children do not have an updated assessment to reflect their current needs. As a result, the plans are less focused on expected outcomes for children and are overly focused on practical tasks and parental needs. The voices of disabled children are absent at their meetings and plans do not always capture their lived experiences.

Children in need benefit from regular child in need meetings and there is good attendance and engagement by partner agencies. Professionals share information about progress and identify any barriers to improvements. Similarly, for children with a child protection plan, core group meetings and child protection review meetings are held regularly. These meetings include detailed discussions with professionals and families, which support effective communication and shared decision-making. Social workers are positive about the quality of multi-agency working.

Most children receive the right level of support. Decisions to step down children's plans from child protection to child in need are mostly appropriate, with a clear management rationale. However, some child protection plans end too quickly. Often, this is before the implementation of the plan has had an opportunity to improve children's circumstances and not all actions have been completed. The consequence of this is that children's needs increase and change for them is not sustained.

Senior leaders have identified that too many children have been the subjects of repeat plans, often for the same reasons. Similarly, for some children, the impact of neglect has not been recognised soon enough, resulting in them being subject to statutory involvement for too long without sustained positive change being achieved. Some cases have been subject to drift and delay as a result of the lack of focus on what positive change would look like, or due to changes in social workers and team managers. In response to this, managers now review children's circumstances after nine and 15 months, to avoid any delay. It is too soon to see the impact of this for all children whose plans have been lengthy or repeated.

The pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline is implemented appropriately when risks are not reducing. The case manager is bringing additional scrutiny of the quality of practice, while simultaneously reviewing and aligning processes. Decisions are now more timely and this is helping to prevent drift in children's plans.

Social workers receive regular supervision from their managers. The practice model is enabling better reflection and discussion on children's progress, and a revised supervision template and policy are helping to bring clarity and direction on next steps. Better-quality supervision explores the views of the child and includes information from professionals involved with the family; this is helping to inform analysis and decision-making.

Children's records demonstrate regular management oversight and direction. However, managers are not consistently ensuring that plans are progressing. In addition, while child protection conference chairs are providing appropriate scrutiny

at midpoint reviews and escalating concerns when there is a lack of progress in children's plans, this is not always effective.

The senior leadership team has an impressive energy and relentless commitment to improving the lives of children in North Northamptonshire. Senior leaders have a sound understanding of their current progress and the key priority areas needed to improve services for children and their families.

Senior leaders know that they have a continuing challenge with recruitment and retention in some social work teams, including those that support children with a child in need or child protection plan. They have a clear objective to stabilise the service through creative recruitment and retention initiatives. This has achieved some success in reducing the use of temporary staff and in recruiting permanent staff, but there is more to do to ensure stability and capacity across the workforce.

Overall caseloads have reduced. However, senior leaders are aware that some social workers' caseloads remain too high, and that this is impacting on the quality and consistency of the work that they do with children and families. Managers monitor caseloads every day in order to support individual social workers to help to ensure that they do not become overloaded or overwhelmed. Additionally, in order to minimise the impact of these high caseloads, and to manage the increasingly high volume of complex work coming into the service, two temporary teams of experienced social workers have been brought in to assist.

Staff morale is high and workers report positively about working for the trust. Social workers value the communication and support that they receive from managers and senior leaders, who are visible, accessible and consult with them regularly. Staff welcome the implementation of the practice model, which is helping to improve the quality of practice and the experiences and progress of children.

Senior leaders have comprehensive and thorough oversight of quality, strengthened by the development of the quality assurance board. The quality assurance framework is giving leaders a clear understanding of children's experiences and the quality of the service, what is working well and what needs to improve. Leaders celebrate good practice. They disseminate this across the workforce to share ideas and learning. Practice weeks, which include the involvement of young inspectors, influence and drive improvements in social work practice in order to improve children's experiences.

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

Yours sincerely

Julie Knight
Her Majesty's Inspector