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Dear Cathi

Monitoring visit to West Northamptonshire local authority children's services

West Northamptonshire and North 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, West and North 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 West Northamptonshire local authority children's services on 28 and 29 July 2021. This is the first monitoring visit to West Northamptonshire, following three visits prior to the local government reorganisation. The visit was carried out by Rachel Griffiths, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Máire Atherton, 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 some children and parents and a range of staff, including elected members, managers, child protection conference chairs and social workers.

Findings and evaluation of progress

The quality of social work practice is improving in the children's safeguarding and disabled children's teams, although it still varies in quality. Staff welcomed the strengths-based practice model and the associated training. The practice model is already enabling positive experiences and progress for some children. One child told inspectors that they felt so much safer because of the work that they had done with their social worker, and a parent described how the help and support that they had received from their social worker had really improved their children's lives.

However, the model of practice is not used consistently across all safeguarding and disabled children's teams. Progress in embedding the model has taken longer as a result of the pandemic and the challenges to workforce recruitment and retention.

Social workers meet with children regularly and, unless there are exceptional circumstances, the visits all take place face to face. This means that children's safety, welfare and progress can be monitored closely by their social workers.

However, the frequency and quality of direct work with children to inform their assessments and plans are variable. Some children's records include examples of excellent and creative direct work with children of different age groups, but this is not always the case. This means that some children's experiences are not fully explored as part of the assessment process.

Some children have experienced too many changes of social worker and, for some, this has prevented them from developing trusting, positive relationships with their worker. It has also prevented social workers from gaining a full understanding of what life is like for individual children and planning accordingly to improve their lives.

Social workers complete assessments in a timely way. Most assessments are updated regularly and when children's circumstances change. Although improving, the quality of assessments remains variable. Stronger assessments show a thorough analysis of all issues affecting the child. Weaker assessments focus on the here and now, rather than the child's full history and what needs to happen to change things for the better for children.

Most assessments lack full consideration of children's unique characteristics, including their culture and heritage. As a result, crucial aspects of their lives are not analysed and are not considered when plans are being formulated to meet their

specific identity needs. Senior leaders have recognised this as an area for development and have plans in place to improve practice.

The quality of children's plans is improving, although it is still variable. Better plans have clear and timebound actions to improve children's circumstances. However, too many plans focus on what the adults need to do, rather than focusing on what the plan is seeking to achieve for children. Most contingency plans are not specific enough to help families to understand exactly what will happen if their child's circumstances do not improve.

Social workers are increasingly writing safety plans with children and families as part of the practice model; this helps families to focus on what needs to change. The quality of these plans varies, with some being written in a form that children and families may find hard to understand. Additionally, plans are not always updated when circumstances change.

Child protection reviews, child in need reviews and most core group meetings are held regularly. Multi-agency attendance is good, and information is shared effectively with parents and between professionals to help monitor the progress of children's plans. Increasingly, child protection conference chairs review children's plans at a midway point and they escalate their concerns when progress is not evident. However, on occasion, escalation does not have the desired effect of improving children's experiences.

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. However, supervision records vary in quality. Too many are descriptive and lack evidence of reflection and challenge, with actions not always being timebound to help progress plans and improve children's circumstances. Some very recent supervision records, using a new template, are of a higher standard, as the template specifically addresses the question of what needs to happen to improve the child's life.

The senior leadership team has an impressive energy and relentless commitment to improving the lives of children in West Northamptonshire. Senior leaders have a

sound understanding of the authority's current strengths and progress, and the key priority areas that still need to be improved.

A determined focus on addressing challenges around workforce capacity, recruitment and retention is having some traction. The trust has had some success in reducing the use of temporary agency staff and recruiting permanent staff and managers. Leaders rightly recognise that workforce capacity and stability are vital to their improvement journey, and that there is still more to do to achieve their goal of recruiting and retaining a highly skilled 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 value the two-way communication with managers and senior leaders. They feel well supported. They enjoy working for the trust and staff morale is high. Staff appreciate the visibility of senior leaders and the opportunities provided to share their views to help to shape ongoing improvement. Staff welcome the implementation of the strengths-based practice model and, although not fully embedded into practice, they recognise how it is helping to improve the quality of their practice and the experiences of children.

Senior leaders have comprehensive and thorough oversight of the quality of practice, strengthened by the development of a quality assurance board which is chaired by the chief executive of the trust. The quality assurance framework is giving leaders a clear understanding of children's experiences, 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 and voice 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

Rachel Griffiths
Her Majesty's Inspector