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Dear Sara

Focused visit to Norfolk children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Norfolk County Council children's services on 5 and 6 October 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Tom Anthony and Margaret Burke.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in care. They considered the quality of planning and decision-making for children in care, the experience and progress of disabled children in care and the experience and progress of children living in unregulated or unregistered provision. They also evaluated the local authority's performance management and quality assurance arrangements.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. Inspectors were on site for the visit. They looked at a range of evidence, including children's records. They talked to practitioners and managers, children and families, as well as to representatives of partner agencies.

Headline findings

Norfolk County Council looks after most children in its care well. The number of children in care in Norfolk has reduced steadily over recent years. Senior leaders have a coherent vision and are taking action to improve support to children and carers. Leaders recognise the importance for children of stable placements. They have made changes to team structures to improve the continuity of support for them. Manageable caseloads in the In Care teams help social workers to build relationships with children, family members and professionals. In the family assessment and safeguarding teams, where many children in care are supported before their permanence plans are secured, there is greater staff turnover which, in addition to restricted capacity within the court system, has contributed to delays in achieving permanence for some children. Leaders are under no illusion about the recruitment and retention challenge. Action to support children and their carers to

avoid placement disruptions, and to help children in residential care step down to foster care, is beginning to have an impact on children's experiences. Regular management oversight and thorough monitoring and review by independent reviewing officers (IROs) are ensuring that children who require further support are identified and plans are put in place for them.

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

- The consistent quality of matching and placement planning information.
- The timeliness, rigour and recording of assessments of family and friend foster carers.

Main findings

In response to the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic, leaders took swift action to risk assess children's circumstances and ensure that vulnerable children were kept in sight. Children in care continued to receive regular visits and, when vulnerabilities for either the child or their carers meant that these needed to be virtual visits, managers signed off these decisions. Other activity, including statutory reviews, was undertaken using virtual technology. In some cases, this has helped children to participate more fully in decisions that affect their lives.

Senior leaders have remained visible and accessible to staff. Frequent and regular communication has ensured that frontline staff have had good information and guidance to support their practice through the pandemic. Staff received an allocation of funding so they could purchase equipment to help them work from home.

Social workers know their children well. They visit children regularly and spend time getting to know them. They make persistent efforts to engage with children and to understand their needs. A commitment to hearing the child's voice is evident, and staff work hard to reflect children's wishes and feelings in their plans. Written plans do not always fully reflect the work that is undertaken with children.

Most children are placed with carers who understand them well and are able to meet their needs. However, some experience too many moves before eventually settling with carers. Social workers' understanding of children's needs is not always well described in matching and placement planning work. This is likely to affect children's experiences in new placements, and to make it harder for carers to understand and meet their needs.

Recently developed services are improving support for children and their carers when there are difficulties. The specialist Support for Success service, signs of stability meetings, child planning meetings and multi-agency support are all helping children and carers through periods of crisis and improving the stability of children's lives. Managers are using permanency planning and monitoring meetings to review

children's progress and maintain their knowledge and understanding of children for whom achieving permanence and placement stability is proving more difficult.

Helping children to understand their experiences and why they are in care is a priority in Norfolk. The commitment to working with children to help them understand their life stories is evident in children's records.

Effective joint working between social care and health services ensures that health assessments are arranged and delivered on time for most children. Children's needs are routinely screened in this way. Children in care receive generally good support for their emotional and mental health. Emotional and mental health support needs are identified in plans for many children and this helps them to access appropriate services.

In some cases, however, children are kept waiting too long for specialist mental health and autism assessments and services. Where this happens, effective multi-agency planning is mitigating the impact of delays and helping those involved to find the best course of action.

The virtual school is a vital part of the team around each child in care. Advisers work creatively and tirelessly to ensure the best educational support for the child. When children have to move placement, every effort is made not to disrupt their education.

A range of support, including specialist short-breaks provision, is offered to disabled children and their families to prevent the need for children to come into care. When this is not possible, careful planning and appropriate placements are provided to meet children's needs. The authority has increased the number of specialist carers able to care for children with disabilities and complex needs.

Support provided to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children is a strength. Impressive partnership working, including the virtual school, education providers, health providers and placement commissioners, helps to meet their emotional, cultural, education and social needs. Children's views and wishes are listened to. Leaders listened when children told them that they did not want to be placed in rural locations. Commissioners are now securing placements in locations that better reflect children's wishes.

Clear referral pathways for children who go missing or are identified as at risk of exploitation mean that safety plans are swiftly put in place to coordinate efforts to reduce the level of risk they face. Children who are assessed as being at high risk are the subject of strategy meetings. Children are routinely offered return home interviews by the specialist missing team. Although not always accepted, when these are completed, the information they provide is used to improve safety plans. Inspectors saw evidence of good management oversight when children are vulnerable to extrafamilial harm.

Joint working between the police, social care, targeted youth support and in-house residential provision is used to identify the best way to build relationships with some of the most vulnerable children in care. This is helping reduce the frequency of children's episodes of going missing as well as their vulnerability to criminal exploitation.

The local authority has had to make temporary use of placements in unregistered settings for a small number of children. Where this has been necessary, leaders have ensured that effective management oversight is in place, monitoring the quality of care and support that children receive.

The timeliness, rigour and recording of assessments of family and friend foster carers need to be strengthened. For some children in care placed with family members, it is not clear that necessary checks and thorough assessments have been undertaken to assess the suitability and safety of the arrangements.

Independent reviewing officer (IRO) oversight, influence and impact are helping to progress work and plans for children. Although not always evident in children's records, IROs make efforts to engage with them between reviews to understand their views, hear their questions or address their concerns. Pen profiles give children information about their allocated IRO, help to build relationships and clarify the IRO role. Access to advocacy is a routine offer to children in care. When IROs have significant concerns about plans or progress for children, they seek to resolve issues at the earliest opportunity.

All children in care are members of the Norfolk Children in Care Council. There is strong evidence of children helping to develop and improve the services that they receive. Children were responsible for the naming of the new In Care and Life Beyond Care teams. They have helped to create a child-friendly visual tool (SNAP) to gather information to strengthen matching of children with carers when placements are required. Children have also structured the forms in which discussions at statutory reviews are recorded.

Parents are well supported by their children's social workers. Creative, trauma-informed practice is helping families to stay connected to, and build relationships with children in care.

Leaders understand the need for a stable workforce, so that children can build trusting and sustained relationships with their social workers. They have introduced smaller In Care teams in which there is greater worker stability, enabling managers and colleagues to develop a shared knowledge and understanding of children supported by the team.

Regular weekly group supervision is used to monitor progress and drive plans for children in care. One-to-one case work supervision is undertaken when children's progress and support require more detailed attention. Supervision records are

evident on most children's records. Training and learning are positively supported, with access to online and professional development opportunities.

Senior leaders are visible and approachable, providing direction, praise and support. A comprehensive quality assurance framework is in place, and learning from audit activity is used well to improve children's care and support improvements in practice across the service. Extensive performance information is used effectively to monitor demand, delivery and performance.

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

Yours sincerely

Tom Anthony
Her Majesty's Inspector