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Dear Pauline

Monitoring visit to Kingston upon Hull City Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Kingston upon Hull City Council's children's services on 18 and 19 November 2021. This was the fourth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in May 2019. Her Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Kathryn Grindrod and Victoria Metheringham.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the following areas of concern identified at the last inspection:

- Planning and achieving permanence for children.
- Frontline managers' oversight and challenge.
- Scrutiny and oversight of practice by independent reviewing officers (IROs).

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.

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 elected members and social workers, and also a young person.

Headline findings

Permanence planning for children in care in Hull has improved since the last inspection. A stable and committed senior leadership team has overseen the implementation of robust monitoring arrangements which prevent unnecessary delays in achieving permanence for the majority of children in care. Social workers feel supported by managers at all levels.

Some team managers are not always effective in their role in ensuring that children's plans are progressing at pace, although strong IRO and senior manager oversight ensures that this does not have a detrimental impact on children's permanence plans. There is also work to do to improve the impact that auditing activity has for individual children. Senior leaders are aware of these areas for development and have plans to address them.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Permanence options for children are considered at an early stage. The weekly best practice scrutiny panel, which has been implemented since the last inspection, provides a forum for senior managers to have oversight of plans for children who have very recently come into care. This ensures that early plans for children are usually well formed and any required actions are in progress by the time of the second review meeting for children.

Parallel planning is considered early, meaning alternative plans for children are in progress should they be needed. Permanence planning is also regularly revisited for children who have been in care for some time. The sense of urgency in progressing permanence plans and preventing delays for children is an improvement since the last inspection.

Children's wishes and feelings inform decisions about them returning to their families or discharging care orders. Risks to children are carefully considered, and decisions about children returning home or care orders being discharged are made at the right time for children. This leads to children feeling more invested in their plans being successful.

Family members are considered as potential connected carers when appropriate, and assessments and checks about them are usually completed quickly and thoroughly. The local authority still has a small number of children in unlawful placements due to delays in the completion of viability assessments of potential carers, although the number of children concerned is much reduced since the last inspection. Extra resource has recently been secured to further address this issue and ensure that connected carers are ratified at panel promptly.

Connected carers are well supported by social workers, which includes the facilitation and support of contact arrangements with people that children wish to see. While family members are routinely considered as potential carers for children, they are not always asked to support existing connected carer placements. For a small number of children, this is a missed opportunity to stabilise their placement with family members.

When children are placed in long-term foster care, careful consideration is given to ensure that they are well matched and supported. The match is endorsed at panel,

giving children an increased sense of permanence and belonging. Children in long-term foster care are generally settled and making good progress.

Special guardianship orders (SGOs) are usually considered when it is appropriate for children and a significant number of SGOs have been granted since the last inspection. This means that most children are not in care for longer than they need to be. There are still a small number of children whose SGO plans have not progressed when they could. The local authority recognises this and funding is in place to create additional resource to further increase the numbers of children leaving care via an SGO or discharge of a care order when the time is right for them to do so.

When an SGO is felt to be the most appropriate plan for a child, detailed assessments and support plans are completed. Special guardians sign agreements to confirm their understanding about their responsibilities to the child. Most children continue to receive support and active planning post their SGO being granted. A small minority of children in specific parts of the service experience a delay in support being offered after their SGO has been granted. While detriment to those children is not apparent, this lack of support risks the stability of the arrangements in the early days post-order.

Adoption planning is timely, thorough and in children's best interests. Adoption tracking meetings monitor all children with a potential plan of adoption. The increasing consideration and use of early permanence placements, along with quality pre-birth processes, are ensuring that children do not experience instability and unnecessary placement moves when their plan is one of adoption.

IRO oversight of progress for children is now a strength in Hull. IROs speak to and see children in between formal review meetings and check the progress of plans at regular intervals. This ensures that the right actions happen at the right time for the majority of children. IROs know their children well and ensure that their voice is heard and considered. When children attend their meetings, they are encouraged to actively participate.

Review meetings for children in care happen regularly. They are thorough, consider the proposed plans for children and agree appropriate actions to progress them. While IROs endorse or challenge plans for children, written records are not always clear why the proposed plan is felt to be the best option for the child, over and above other potential options. It is also not always clear from written records why plans about children have changed, if they do change. This limits children's future understanding of decisions made about them should they read their records at a later date.

Social workers know their children well. They see them regularly and the time they spend with them has a purpose. Social workers ensure that children's voices are heard in plans and meetings about them. Direct work with children helps their wishes

and feelings to be considered in planning about them. Life-story work is completed when adoption is the plan for children. For children in long-term care, the completion of life-story work is more ad hoc and unplanned. Children in long-term care would benefit from life-story work having clear focus and objectives.

A stable and permanent senior leadership team is continuing to drive progress in areas of permanence for children. Strong corporate and political backing means that the local authority is responsive to new challenges.

The significant improvements in performance management systems and data since the last inspection mean that information about the service is detailed and 'live'. The local authority's self-assessment and performance data and the observations from this visit show synergy, meaning the local authority knows itself well.

Improved transparency means that senior leaders and elected members have more confidence in their knowledge about the service children receive. The chief executive and lead member are now in a more informed position to accurately hold the senior leadership team to account for the quality of social work practice with children. The improved focus from elected members in their corporate parenting role, alongside strong corporate ownership, has led to noticeable improvements in achieving permanence for children.

Leaders are working to rebuild the confidence that partner agencies and the judiciary have in social work practice with children in Hull. This is leading to more effective strategic relationships and enabling the further development of services for children.

The social work model of practice in Hull is beginning to embed further in work with children. While there is more to do to build social workers' confidence in their use of the model, it is starting to bring focus and consistency to practice with children.

Auditing activity is giving leaders and members a broad picture of practice and compliance. Audits do not always focus sufficiently on improving children's outcomes, and actions from audits are not always routinely followed up in supervision with social workers. This means potential improvements for individual children are not always promptly completed.

Social workers feel that their caseloads are usually manageable, although some social workers do have high caseloads. Reducing social worker caseloads through a reduction in social worker vacancy rates is a continuing priority for the authority, and detailed recruitment and retention plans are in place.

Social workers describe very supportive managers at all levels. Newly qualified social workers benefit from a range of support, including the assessed and supported year in employment (ASYE) coordinator role. Social workers receive regular case and personal supervision, and some of this is reflective in nature. However, first-line managers do not always hold social workers to account and challenge them when

there may be drift in children's plans. The impact of this for individual children is usually mitigated by strong IRO oversight and senior managers' tracking of children. The authority recognises that there is work to do in helping some first-line managers be more rigorous in their roles.

Social workers can see the progress the local authority is making for children and know what areas need further development. They recognise that their work is more planned and focused than it was at the time of the last inspection. Social workers want to do their best for 'our children' and feel they are being supported by senior leaders to achieve this.

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

Yours sincerely

Kathryn Grindrod
Her Majesty's Inspector