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Dear Amanda

Monitoring visit to Luton Borough Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Luton Borough Council children's services on 8 and 9 December 2021. This was the fourth visit since services were judged inadequate in February 2020. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Tom Anthony and Margaret Burke.

Areas covered by the visit

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

- The quality of social work assessments and plans for children in need.
- The quality of social work assessments and plans for children subject to a child protection plan.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. This visit was carried out fully on site, with inspectors meeting social workers and managers in person within current government guidelines. Inspectors also spoke with children, parents and partner agencies by phone.

Headline findings

There has been some progress and improvement in the service that is given to children in need and those in need of protection since the inspection in January 2020. Leaders recognise there remains too much variability in the quality of work and the pace of change for children and families. They have put in place a range of activities to provide extra oversight of children. However, the support children receive does not currently always deliver progress and improvement in their lives

swiftly enough. There is more to do to ensure that practice is of a consistent quality to improve the experience and progress of children.

Financial investment has created increased capacity within the service and means that children are supported by workers who generally have smaller caseloads. Leaders know that the workforce is the most critical resource. A well-considered workforce strategy, central to which is the development of social workers through their Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) and beyond, is beginning to improve workforce stability.

Social workers visit children regularly, helping to keep them safe. However, the quality of assessments and plans is still too varied and too dependent on the skills and experience of children's allocated worker. Management oversight and supervision is not yet achieving the consistency of improvement needed for all children.

Findings and evaluation of progress

The impact of COVID-19 on children, families and the workforce in Luton has been enormous. The diverse, transient and ever-changing community has been significantly affected. Leaders, practitioners and partners have continued to identify children at risk and to provide support to them and their families, despite the obvious challenges and risks. Strong corporate commitment has led to investment to improve the support provided to children and their families. Social workers and partners have continued to see children and families face to face when this is needed. They have made good use of virtual visits and hybrid meetings to ensure that not only social workers but also other professionals are able to see children and families to provide advice, help and support. Children told inspectors that their social workers spent time getting to know them and provided valued help to them and their families.

Children who have been assessed as being in need of help and those on child protection plans are supported in the family safeguarding service with the right level of social work intervention. Assessments of children's needs, however, are not always up to date, and their quality varies greatly, depending on the skills and expertise of their allocated worker. Social workers are able to identify risks, including risks associated with substance misuse, neglect and the impact of poor parental mental health. Children and families benefit from the involvement of a range of community services that provide effective specialist support to parents. This helps reduce the impact of these issues on children's lives.

The support children receive does not always result in quick enough improvement in their lives. In some cases, plans to support children have not been delivered within agreed timescales. Supervision is not ensuring a consistent quality of practice and timely impact for children. Leaders recognise that the pace of change for children needs to improve and have put in place additional oversight and assurance mechanisms that are helping to mitigate the fact that some children and families are

not receiving support swiftly enough. Moderated case audits that identify detailed timebound actions, increased oversight by independent reviewing officers (IROs) and thorough case reviews by senior managers are helping some children get the support that they need. However, not all children benefit from this additional oversight.

Since the last full inspection, leaders have increased capacity across the service and added more social worker posts to the family safeguarding service. Although improving, staff turnover and changes of social worker are also still having an impact on children and their families. They experience a loss of momentum and delayed activity as new workers take time to become familiar with children's information and history and develop relationships with the families they have been allocated to work with.

Identified by leaders as a priority area for improvement, most children's plans are now clearly written, focus on identified risks and needs and set out actions within clear timescales. Children, families and other agencies know who is expected to take action to meet children's needs. However, some child protection plans are still too long. This means they do not provide a clear enough focus on the things that matter most. More recent child protection plans are shorter and set out more clearly what change is required to keep children safe.

Decision-making in child protection case conferences is effective. Conferences are well attended and partner agencies are engaged in developing and delivering plans to improve children's circumstances. IROs engage well with parents and children. In order to prevent further delays, some families receive input directly from IROs, who take action to progress plans when support to children and families has not been delivered within agreed timeframes.

Children's progress is monitored at multi-agency core group and child in need review meetings. Parents attend meetings and are central to the plans made for their children. Although they do not always drive progress at sufficient pace, review meetings do provide a regular opportunity for professionals to review and update plans.

Disabled children receive good support and they make good progress in education. Social workers engage well with children, including those with individual communication needs. While most parents are supported well to provide the care they need, those who have caring needs or other needs of their own are not consistently offered a carer's assessment.

Children who go missing or who are identified as being vulnerable to criminal or sexual exploitation are identified swiftly. Strong and effective work, both within the Family Partnership and Youth Offending Service and involving practitioners across the wider partnership, is helping to engage children and families and reduce levels of risk faced by children.

Children's welfare and progress is central to the vision and plans that the stable, committed leadership team has put in place to drive improvement in the quality and consistency of frontline practice.

Investment since the last inspection has created additional capacity and helped reduce caseloads across the service. Most social workers' caseloads are now within the authority's target levels. However, some social workers in their ASYE are responsible for too many cases involving children at high levels of risk. The support and supervision that these workers receive, while valued and appreciated, is not always thorough enough to drive progress for children.

The Social Work Academy provides extensive support to the workforce. Learning and development is supported with varied training opportunities, including well-planned and well-attended practice weeks, which have continued despite restrictions.

Leaders know the strengths and weaknesses of their service. They have put in place additional activity to strengthen how they monitor and improve the impact of practice with children and families. Case file auditing is providing a better understanding and oversight of the progress most children are making. Audits are driving improved compliance. Practitioners know that essential core activity is non-negotiable. However, weaknesses remain in the consistency of the service provided. There is more work to do to ensure that improvements in children's lives are achieved quickly enough.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Tom Anthony
Her Majesty's Inspector