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Dear Ms Nelson

Focused visit to City of Doncaster Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to City of Doncaster Council children's services on 3 and 4 May 2023. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Jo Warburton and Russel Breyer.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for the 'front door'.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers and managers. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.

Headline findings

Senior leaders have significantly improved strategic planning and partnership working at the front door since the last inspection. Leaders know the service well. Performance management and quality assurance arrangements that support managers in monitoring this practice area have been strengthened. This improvement has taken place at pace, and at a time of significant change while transitioning children's services from Doncaster Children's Trust back to City of Doncaster Council control.

Contacts from professionals or members of the public are responded to swiftly and effectively where there are concerns about a child. All relevant information about children and families is sought and analysed by experienced and knowledgeable social workers. Risks are well understood, and managers provide clear direction to social workers to ensure that children receive the most appropriate service response. There is a well-coordinated response to early help.

There are increasing volumes of referrals from the police which are not triaged before sending to the front door. This places additional and unnecessary pressure on the service. Staff are timely in their response to children's and families' needs out of hours. However, there are insufficient emergency placements, resulting in some

children who have become children in care due to police powers of protection being accommodated at the police station overnight before moving into more appropriate care.

Some children experience re-referral to the front door because, once the child's case transfers to the assessment service, assessments do not always explore the impact on children from cumulative harm. Due to the volume of work, managers in the assessment teams do not always have the capacity to ensure robust oversight of assessments before closure or stepping down to early help. A recent increase in funding and a successful recruitment campaign have very recently increased social work and management capacity in these teams.

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

- The quality of assessments in relation to the consideration of the historical context and significant events in the child's life.
- Management oversight within the assessment service.
- The sufficiency of available placements for children who become subject to police powers of protection.

Main findings

Children who need help and protection in Doncaster are referred to children's social care through the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). Social workers in the MASH are well supported to gather and analyse relevant information by confident and knowledgeable managers, who have a good overview of the work. As a result, social workers respond quickly and appropriately to contacts and referrals and make effective decisions about how to act on information where there are concerns for the safety and well-being of children.

Social workers discuss risk to children identified as vulnerable due to witnessing domestic abuse with co-located police colleagues. This ensures a joined-up response. However, too many children are referred to the MASH by police without triage. These referrals account for the largest proportion of contacts to the front door, many of which do not require a service. This puts unnecessary pressure on the front door resources.

Children who need immediate protection receive an effective and timely response. Child protection strategy meetings are held swiftly, and meetings are mostly well attended by partner agencies, who share information regarding risks and ensure that the right decisions are made. Health partners are not always able to attend these meetings but do provide written information in their absence. Their absences dilute the richness of the discussion regarding risk.

The interface between out-of-hours and daytime services is particularly effective and practice is robust. There is an absence of emergency beds for children with more complex behaviour and needs. A small number of children have been accommodated in police custody overnight due to a lack of suitable care placements.

When children and their families need early help, they benefit from well-coordinated responses and timely services. Workers spend time getting to know children and, through direct work, they help children to talk about their lived experiences, which helps to inform decisions about the level of help and support they need. Managers make appropriate decisions when children step down to early help or step up to children's social care. The process is well managed, with social workers and early help practitioners working jointly with families to provide additional support to children through the transition period. As a result, partners are confident that children receive the right level of service to meet their need without having to always refer through the front door.

When children require a social work assessment, social workers from the assessment service initially visit promptly and thereafter visit children in line with their needs. Assessments are mostly timely. While many are of good quality, not all consider historical factors about children and families well enough to fully understand families' strengths and risks. For a small number of children where cumulative harm has not been explored sufficiently, this has led to repeat referrals and the risk of further harm when children's cases have been closed or stepped down to early help prematurely.

A small number of children are re-referred to MASH because decisions are made to close some children's cases where more persistence in seeking engagement with families may avoid a cycle of closure and re-referral. Due to increased volumes, assessment team managers have, until very recently, experienced periods of time when their capacity to quality assure assessments robustly has been affected.

Senior leaders know the strengths of the service very well and know where improvement is needed. They have acted to mitigate risk for children while they roll out their improvement plans and embed practice changes. Political leaders have provided significant financial investment to increase staffing capacity at the front door. This is beginning to increase social work capacity and free up managers to better oversee the quality of practice.

Leaders acknowledge that workers have felt unsettled during the transition of children's social care services from the Doncaster Children's Trust back to City of Doncaster Council control. Senior leaders have been visible and have communicated appropriately to staff during this process. Social workers told inspectors during this visit that they appreciate the support they continue to receive from leaders and managers. Consequently, there is a much-improved sense of security and stability within the workforce in this practice area since the last inspection.

Persistent strategic discussions to promote partnership working within the front door are in evidence. This has resulted in increasing the co-location of partners within the MASH. Leaders have prioritised the development of the electronic case-recording system. This system was previously a hindrance to effective practice but now appropriately supports social workers in their work. The greatest impact is seen within the out-of-hours service, where effective communication and information sharing with daytime colleagues enable a seamless transition of support for children who come to the attention of this service.

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

Yours sincerely

Jo Warburton
His Majesty's Inspector