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Mr Andy Smith
Derby City Council
The Council House
Corporation Street
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Dear Mr Smith

Focused visit to Derby City children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Derby City children's services on 25 to 26 October 2023. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Jo Warburton, Rachel Fairhurst and Matthew Hedges.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need and child protection planning.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

Headline findings

Since the last inspection in 2022, the stable senior leadership team has remained committed to responding proactively to meet the needs of children and families living in Derby.

For children who are subject to child-in-need or child protection plans, senior leaders analyse emerging trends effectively and develop their services accordingly. These children therefore benefit from a strong and effective service that manages and reduces risk. The workforce currently consists entirely of permanently employed social workers. Children are consequently benefiting from consistency of workers, which supports effective relationship-building and progress with their plans.

Strong partnership-working is seen across all levels of the service. Robust governance arrangements ensure that the chief executive and lead member are well informed and hold senior leaders to account.

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

- Consistency of recording in children's case records.

Main findings

Children who were seen on this visit and who are subject to child-in-need or child protection planning are receiving an effective service. Social workers identify children's needs and escalating risks through accurate assessments that lead to dynamic multi-agency plans. Plans are of good quality and focused on children's needs. Social workers identify appropriate actions to help families make progress. As a result of the support provided, most children are better protected.

Social work assessments are thorough and evaluate risk well. The strong understanding of risk to children threads through the assessment to analysis and planning for the child. Social workers spend time with children to understand their experiences and ensure that their voice is heard. Following their assessment, most children are receiving the right support at the right time.

Children who are on a child-in-need plan are worked with at an appropriate threshold. Social workers introduce alternatively qualified practitioners to families when they assess that a child has a lower level of need. The practitioners are appropriately skilled to undertake the identified work with children and their families. Social workers continue to maintain their relationships with families and partners through regular review of children's plans and progress. Social workers resume or maintain case responsibility for the highest priority children in need. This means that work with children appropriately addresses their needs and the current level of risk.

Social workers are responsive to identified and emerging risks for children. Strategy meetings are called promptly when concerns for children increase. There is comprehensive information-sharing between partners who attend these meetings and decision-making is appropriate. Social workers visit children and undertake work to understand their experiences if section 47 enquiries are subsequently made. Decision-making following the enquiries is sound.

Children's risks are identified well within child protection plans and the actions that all parties need to take are clearly recorded. Core groups are well attended. This promotes accountability across all agencies to reduce risk and improve outcomes for children.

Children's plans focus on how to improve outcomes for children and are mostly written in a way that helps parents to understand the local authority's expectations. However, the plans do not always have clear recorded timescales for the actions identified. In addition, contingency planning for children is not always explicitly outlined in their child-in-need plans. Despite this, social workers are clear about the work they are undertaking to safeguard children and help families to make progress.

Social workers engage with their professional partners effectively. Multi-agency network meetings are held regularly and are well attended by professionals working with the family. Social workers use their professional networks to respond creatively to children. This provides a dynamic response that mitigates risk, in particular for

disabled children when they are awaiting the identification of specialist resources to meet their complex needs.

Children are seen regularly by practitioners who establish trusting relationships with them. Social workers ensure that they see children in different settings to understand their experiences. For disabled children, this helps social workers to understand the child's voice through detailed observation of their behaviour and interactions with others. Social workers use direct-work tools, including life-story work, to help children to understand their experiences. Children and their families are progressing because of the support they are receiving from practitioners during their visits.

Managers provide strong oversight of the service children receive when they are subject to child-in-need or child protection plans. Social workers benefit from informal and formal opportunities for case discussion with their managers. Supervision records demonstrate reflection and professional curiosity. However, managers do not always record timescales effectively when tasks are set in supervision. Senior managers oversee the transfer of children's cases between children's social care and early help at Vulnerable Children's Meetings. They also track the impact on children who continue to remain on child protection plans for more than one year. This scrutiny monitors the effectiveness of child protection plans, ensuring that relevant and timely action is taken to safeguard children when needed.

Leaders know themselves well. They embrace the outcomes from quality assurance activity, which helps them to understand children's experiences and inform their service development.

All social workers spoken to were positive about their experience working for Derby. They displayed commitment to their work and reported that their caseloads were manageable. Social workers feel supported by leaders and appreciate leaders' investment in clinical supervision. They describe how this benefits their well-being and also how training opportunities enhance their professional development.

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