

16 May 2024

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Dear Catherine

### **Focused visit to Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Dudley children's services on 1 and 2 February 2024. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Claire Beckingham and Rebecca Dubbins.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for placement decision-making for older children in care, with a particular focus on:

- children, including children who meet the definition of 'eligible', living in or with a plan for living in supported accommodation
- children aged 16 or 17 years old living in unregistered children's homes (including on an emergency basis)
- children under 16 years old living in unregistered children's homes (including on an emergency basis)
- placement sufficiency, including fostering matching practice.

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

### **Headline findings**

At the last inspection in November 2022, Dudley's services to children were judged to be requires improvement to be good. At this focused visit, older children in care benefit from strong practice from their independent reviewing officers (IROs) and social workers. Supervision recorded on children's files is of high quality, but the regularity with which it takes place is still not frequent enough on most children's records. Practice for children aged 16 or 17 who present as homeless was a weakness at the previous inspection. While the procedure and overall strategy for these children has been clarified, the process is not consistently followed or completed well enough when it is followed. Practice previously found to be variable

has not improved sufficiently and risks to some children have not reduced until suitable placements can be found.

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

- The identification of and response to children aged 16 and 17 who present as, or who become, homeless.
- The frequency of supervision.
- The consistency of permanence planning processes for all children in care.

### **Main findings**

There is a limited choice of placements for some children, but social workers take care to share information about their strengths, challenges and needs with those who will be looking after them. Social workers think carefully about how residential homes and foster carers can be assisted to meet children's needs. Consequently, most children are in homes where they are well supported.

Dudley's permanency strategy is clear, with a robust process and expectation for all children. Children's permanence plan is established by their second child in care review, with formal matching to longer-term carers for most children living in these arrangements. Children who have more recently come into care benefit from regular permanence planning meetings, but for a minority of older children who have been in care longer without being matched, these meetings are not fully embedded.

Social workers engage parents and carers to ensure that plans for children evolve and that children benefit from supportive networks. Thorough assessments are carried out for children able to have unsupervised or overnight family time with parents or their family, or where there is planned rehabilitation home. Arrangements are ratified by senior leaders and reviewed to ensure that plans continue to meet children's needs.

Arrangements for children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless, or who become homeless shortly after being referred to Dudley, are weak and for some children risks do not reduce in a timely way particularly in relation to poor mental health and sexual exploitation. While Dudley has a clear joint children's services and housing protocol, the practice does not reflect that children are informed of their rights and entitlements or helped to make decisions which are right for them. Records do not evidence assessment of whether their needs are met or risks to them managed. Supported accommodation has been used for children who were not ready for increased independence and as a result risks to them did not reduce until a suitable placement was found. Data available to the leadership team does not reliably identify these vulnerable children or provide a line of sight to their experiences; leaders are aware of difficulties with the case management system and have escalated this with their case management provider.

When unregistered supported accommodation or children's homes are used for children, senior leaders and managers have increased their line of sight and monitoring to assure themselves that these children are safe. Dudley continues to carry out extensive searches and move children to registered provision at the earliest opportunity and are working with providers towards registration.

Social workers speak and write about children and families respectfully, with empathy, pride and enjoyment. Language in children's records is consistently thoughtful and children returning to read these would benefit from rich and coherent accounts of their time in care. They would know how social workers chose and engaged their placements to better meet their needs.

Some children have experienced too many changes in social worker: leaders recognised this and Dudley's recruitment strategy is starting to make a positive difference in respect of stability and recently reducing caseloads. The impact of high caseloads has been that social workers have been hampered in completing timely work for children. Visits to most children are undertaken regularly and at the frequency needed. Direct work with children ensures that their views are clearly expressed throughout their records. For a minority of children, visiting is only undertaken at the minimum statutory level and does not increase when they are experiencing difficulties; these children do not benefit from more frequent support when they need it most.

Children in care review meetings are timely. Minutes are of high quality and written to the child, and children participate in their meetings. IROs carry out progress reviews and offer guidance and reflective discussions to social workers between meetings. Children's resulting plans are informed by needs, updated assessments or risk assessments and clear about what needs to happen for children. Planning towards increased independence is explicit and individualised.

Children, including disabled children, benefit from professionals and their placements working together to ensure that their health needs are well met. Emotional well-being has been a real focus for Dudley. Strengths and difficulties questionnaires are frequently used and many children are accessing therapeutic support.

Social workers and the virtual school secure appropriate support for children returning to education or for those who need extra support to achieve their potential. Electronic personal education plans are completed regularly with aspirational targets set. For some disabled children, or those who have an education, health and care plan, it has taken too long to secure them suitable provision and this has had a negative impact on some children's placements.

Children placed out of area have been placed to maintain links with their culture and communities for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, or to remove them from the immediate vicinity of harm, or to access placements bespoke for their needs. Most are in nearby authorities and children placed out of area receive the same level of support as those in Dudley.

Children who go missing receive high-quality return home interviews and risk assessments are undertaken as a result of episodes of going missing. Multi-agency child exploitation meetings and support via Channel panel for children at risk of radicalisation are helping reduce risks to children and supporting placement stability.

Dudley's corporate parenting strategy is innovative and led by the voice of children. Children are supported via independent visitors and advocacy and there has been progress in respect of available participation opportunities. A range of creative means are used to seek the views of children. Inspectors were privileged to talk with children who were broadly positive about social workers, although some older children stated that they do not know why they are in care and were unclear about their future plans.

Recorded supervision, when on file, is reflective, detailed, curious and thorough. However, there are also large gaps in supervision taking place and some workers were unclear about expectations around the frequency. For some children in crisis, supervision was not at the level needed.

Induction is an area for continued focus as identified by staff surveys and the senior leadership team has strengthened this process over recent months. Social workers report that recently they feel more secure now they are managed by permanent managers. They spoke highly of the support they receive from managers and senior leaders. Social workers are also very positive about access to training and enthusiastic about how learning is applied to support children.

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

Yours sincerely

Claire Beckingham  
**His Majesty's Inspector**