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2 March 2022

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Dear Ms Moore

Focused visit to Leicestershire County Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Leicestershire County Council children's services on 26 and 27 January 2022. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Victoria Horsefield and Julie Knight.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need and those subject to a child protection plan, including children receiving help and support from the disabled children's service.

Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers and managers. They also considered local authority performance management, quality assurance information and children's case records.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. However, the delivery model was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 context. The lead inspector and the director of children's services agreed arrangements to deliver this visit effectively on site while working within national and local guidelines for responding to COVID-19 and meeting the needs of the local authority's workforce.

Headline findings

Leicestershire children's services were last inspected in September 2019 when the overall effectiveness of the service was judged to require improvement to be good. Since then, a committed, strong and focused senior leadership team has built on the progress seen at that last inspection.

Commitment and investment by political and corporate leaders, together with effective work by senior leaders and staff, have meant that responses to children in need of help and protection have improved.

The views of children sought through direct work and a culture of placing them at the centre of practice are increasingly informing decision-making. The quality of plans, although variable, is improving, and as a result most children are receiving effective support.

The local authority's accurate self-evaluation of its performance demonstrates that quality assurance processes are working. Senior leaders have a good understanding of the strengths of their service and have a clear plan of action to tackle those areas that require further development.

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

- Consistency in the quality of children's plans.
- Consistency in the recording of supervisions to ensure that it evidences reflective discussion and how this is leading to progress against the child's plan.

Main findings

Children are seen regularly face to face by a consistent social worker, at the required frequency outlined in their plan or more regularly to ensure their safety and welfare. Social workers, at all levels of experience, speak with assurance and confidence about their children. They know their children well and have a good understanding of what life is like for them at home. Creative and thoughtful direct work using the model of practice is completed with children, which gives them an opportunity to share their views and helps children to build a positive and purposeful relationship with their social worker. This makes it easier for children to share their worries with someone they trust.

Senior managers and staff have worked hard to actively strengthen the voice and influence of children. Children's records are written to the child. This places the child at the centre of practice, ensuring that their voice is heard, and their wishes and feelings are the focus of decision-making. If children access their records in the future, this will assist them to understand how and why decisions were made.

Children's views are shared with professionals and given due consideration in multi-agency meetings, and this helps to test if their plan is on track, that they are making progress and whether risk is reducing. Children are, where appropriate, encouraged to participate in child protection conferences. Where this is not possible, the reports presented by the children's rights officer on their behalf provide a powerful representation of children's wishes and feelings and contribute to future planning.

Social workers work hard to include all family members, including non-resident fathers, to develop effective safety plans through family meetings. Safety plans are strong and comprehensive and provide clear expectations. They are reviewed after a significant incident to ensure that they remain robust and relevant. Inspectors saw

evidence of this leading to a reduction in risk for children, leading to a successful step down from Public Law Outline (PLO) processes.

Children receive a timely and proportionate social work response to manage risk and meet their needs. Where risks reduce, and situations improve, children are provided with support at a lower level. When children's circumstances do not improve, child protection procedures or pre-proceedings are initiated appropriately.

Children's plans vary in quality. Inspectors saw stronger plans when a child was subject to a child protection plan. Stronger plans had focused targeted actions and clear timescales, and provided an understanding of how progress will be measured, and success achieved. Some child in need plans were weaker, actions were too generic, did not focus on the specific needs of the individual child and lacked clear timescales. This makes it difficult to monitor progress and assess whether the child's needs will be met by the planned interventions in a timescale that is right for them. Senior leaders are aware of this variability from their audit findings and have plans in place to address this lack of consistency.

Children benefit from timely and regular child protection conferences, core groups and child in need reviews. Meetings are well attended by partner agencies that share information effectively. Child protection coordinators maintain regular oversight of children, subject to child protection planning, through mid-point reviews and a formal escalation process that is helping to prevent drift and delay.

Most disabled children receive an effective service but some staffing instability within the service has led to challenges in allocating children to permanent and experienced workers. This has meant that for some disabled children, their child in need meetings and plans have been delayed. Senior leaders have responded to this by providing additional management oversight of those children and have a plan to address these difficulties. Inspectors identified stronger work for those children with a child protection plan and most disabled children's child protection plans are progressing, resulting in reduced risks to children.

There is a well-chaired and directive legal planning panel to decide any cases that are being considered for PLO. Social work reports to these meetings are detailed, and clearly evidence the history, the concerns, and the reasons for asking for PLO. Letters before proceedings detail well the concerns of the local authority and the expectations of the family, therefore ensuring that families are given clear support and opportunities to make effective changes for children before further legal action is taken. Once in PLO, children's cases are regularly reviewed with appropriate senior management oversight to prevent drift and delay, and where there is a need to take further action, to safeguard them, this is done without delay.

Social workers spoke positively about the support they received from their managers. Supervision is taking place on a regular basis and workers spoke about having access

to management advice and guidance outside the formal supervision process. Stronger supervision is able to demonstrate clear SMART actions and plans while remaining focused on the analysis and needs of children. However, the quality of the recording of supervision is inconsistent. Not all supervision records demonstrate effectively the quality of the discussion that is taking place and how supervision is helping to progress children's plans. This increases the potential for drift and delay, with some plans not reflecting the child's current circumstances.

Staff like working in Leicestershire; they are well motivated and report feeling well supported by team managers, senior managers and the wider organisation. Caseloads have reduced and staff report these to be manageable. Social workers in their first year of practice feel well supported and have a protected caseload, access to a mentor and bespoke training, ensuring that they develop at a pace that is right for them.

Staff report positively about the training they have received in relation to core skills and Leicestershire's chosen practice model. Inspectors saw effective examples of this training being put into practice. Staff new to the authority have a thorough induction process, ensuring that they are aware of the expectations and ways of working in the authority.

Senior leaders have maintained a steady pace of change despite the challenges faced over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the last inspection, leaders have prioritised stabilising the workforce and creating the foundations from where effective social work practice can develop. While maintaining the focus on the priority areas, senior leaders have mapped the next stage of their improvement journey through their road to excellence strategy, with the ambition of delivering high-quality services to all children in Leicestershire.

Senior leaders are aware of the challenges they face to continue to recruit and retain skilled and experienced workers. However, they have stabilised the workforce by investing in their frontline managers and by increasing their social work establishment. Social work locality teams are well resourced, and staff spoke positively about the input families receive from the team-based family intervention workers and the family support workers. This provides an additional layer of direct work available to families, for example to develop resilience and parenting skills.

Senior managers and leaders have a good understanding of frontline practice through strong performance and quality assurance processes. Performance data is used intelligently to identify areas of practice needing further scrutiny. Audits are now completed in partnership with social workers and families and provide an accurate evaluation of the quality of practice.

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

Your sincerely

Victoria Horsefield
Her Majesty's Inspector

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