

Aviation House
125 Kingsway
London WC2B 6SE

T 0300 123 1231
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk

23 November 2016



Mr Damien Allen
Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council Children's Services
Civic Office
Doncaster
DN1 3BU

Dear Mr Allen

Second monitoring visit of Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the second monitoring visit of Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council children's services on 24 and 25 October 2016.

This visit was the second monitoring visit since the local authority and the children's trust were judged inadequate for services to children who need help and protection in September 2015. This monitoring visit was carried out by Her Majesty's Inspectors Graham Reiter and Fiona Millns and Regulatory Inspection Manager Parveen Hussain.

The local authority and the trust are making significant progress in the areas of work covered on this visit from the low baseline identified by the single inspection of September 2015. This reflects similar progress to that seen on the first monitoring visit in August 2016. No children were seen to be in situations of unassessed, unmanaged or unacceptable risk.

Areas covered by the visit

- The quality and effectiveness of plans for children in need of help and protection.
- The quality and timeliness of reviewing and progressing the work to reduce risk and support children in need of help and protection.
- The effectiveness of work undertaken the Public Law Outline (PLO), specifically the quality of pre-proceedings work.
- The voice and experiences of children.
- Management oversight and timeliness of decision making.
- The use of performance management information and quality assurance work to monitor and improve performance, timeliness and quality.

A range of evidence was considered during the visit, including case discussions with social workers and managers, information provided by staff and managers, performance management and quality assurance information, and viewing of electronic case records. We spoke to service users and partner agencies, as well as to social workers and managers, about their experience of working in Doncaster.

Summary of findings

- The council and the trust have made significant progress in improving the quality of work since the single inspection in 2015. Further work and progress are required to meet the council's and the trust's timeline and targets for improvement.
- Performance and quality assurance arrangements are a particular strength. The effectiveness of these mean that the trust knows itself well, demonstrating an understanding of current practice, with clear plans in place to focus and sustain improvements.
- Increased stability and development of the workforce have been key elements underpinning the practice improvements seen on this visit.
- Plans to support children and families were in place on all children's cases seen on this visit, but these do not consistently focus on the key areas or detail how progress will be measured in a timely way.
- The processes for reviewing child protection work are improving, and progress is now being made on work previously subject to drift and delay.
- The quality of reviewing practice for children in need work is variable, with some cases seen not being subject to timely or effective reviews.
- While recent improvements were seen, work undertaken under Public Law Outline (PLO) pre-proceedings is not of sufficient quality or effectively reviewed to ensure that decisions that are made are consistent and timely. The initial plans presented to court are not comprehensive.
- Assessments seen on this visit were not all updated in a timely way and the information was not always effectively analysed to support clear planning and interventions.
- The voice of the child is clear in the vast majority of cases seen, with children being visited regularly and seen alone. The understanding of the child's experience is not consistently used to underpin the work.
- Clear, recent improvements in the quality of management oversight of casework have been supported by the successful recruitment of permanent team managers.
- All staff and managers who spoke with inspectors were positive about working for the trust in Doncaster and about the support, challenge and professional development that they receive. They described feeling that Doncaster is now a much safer place for children and for employees of the trust.

Evaluation of progress

Performance management information and quality assurance work are particular strengths. Comprehensive performance data for children in need, which includes child protection, demonstrates clear improvements in many of the key performance areas. Data is used to monitor and report on compliance and, increasingly, is being utilised alongside quality assurance programmes to support and improve the quality of work.

Data is also being used to inform managers' actions, for example in monitoring social workers' caseloads. This means that performance and quality assurance systems are used as effective 'preventative' and support tools in developing the performance management culture. There is good understanding of what underlies the data and where action is required to improve performance and quality.

An effective audit process engages frontline workers and managers in supporting individual case and broader practice improvements. Thematic audits have improved practice and monthly audit trends also demonstrate improvements in the quality of work.

Workforce development is contributing to improvements in quality. The intensive practice improvement programme and successful recruitment and retention work are key elements, underpinning improvements made in the quality and consistency of practice seen on this visit. This has resulted in permanent appointments for team managers and child protection chairs, and there has been a reduction in agency staff, now at 11%. Caseloads are reducing. Training for staff is targeted to address areas where practice needs to improve. There are regular 'stop the clock' sessions, when practice advisers provide training on aspects of practice arising from quality audits or from social workers identifying shortfalls in their knowledge or experience.

The trust conducted a children in need audit in April 2016 which identified shortfalls in practice in relation to drift and delay, the quality of assessments and step up/step down arrangements. As a result, practice advisers have subsequently delivered workshops on assessments, chronologies, recording and planning to tackle the weaknesses identified, and managers have an increasing grip on drift and delay. A re-audit is planned to capture evidence of improvement.

There is clear improvement from the single inspection in that all cases seen have a plan, and the quality of the plans has improved from a low baseline. However, not all plans consistently focus on the key areas or detail how progress will be measured in a timely way. Initial care plans presented to court are not sufficiently comprehensive to support clear and timely case management through the court process and timely progression to long-term outcomes for children.

Reviewing processes for child protection work are improving and progress is now being made on work that has previously been subject to drift and delay. Child protection conferences utilise a nationally recognised practice framework, and this

supports the effective engagement of families and encourages the voice of children. This has been supported by a fully staffed team of child protection chairs with manageable caseloads. There is increased evidence of challenge by child protection chairs to support practice improvement, including in cases seen on inspection. Further work is required to embed the recently reviewed dispute resolution process to support consistent timely resolution of issues raised.

Core groups are effective in supporting ongoing case progression and evaluation. Core group meetings are held regularly and progress is updated with specific reference to, and update of, child protection plan actions. There is good multi-agency attendance at the vast majority of cases. Current levels of risk are evaluated and responded to on an ongoing basis.

The quality of reviewing practice for children in need work is variable, with some cases seen not being subject to timely or effective reviews. Reviews do not take place regularly and, in a small number of cases seen, there is no evidence that reviews have taken place. When there has been drift and delay, this has not been effectively identified or addressed through children in need reviews. When there have been children in need reviews, these do not focus sufficiently on the detail, progress and development of the child in need plan.

The trust has set a high standard for the review and update of all assessments every six months. However, assessments seen on this visit were not all updated or completed in a timely way, and the information was not always effectively analysed to support clear planning and interventions. Very detailed recording is evident, but insufficient focus is placed on the child's experience, with limited consideration of wider family members.

Work undertaken under Public Law Outline (PLO) pre-proceedings work is not of sufficient quality or effectively reviewed to ensure decisions that are made to enter proceedings or exit from the PLO process are consistent and timely. However, there have been improvements in the use of the PLO process, with 32 children at the time of the monitoring visit, increasing from a very small number at the time of the single inspection. A new tracking system is in place, however drift and delay are evident in both entering and progressing work under the pre-proceedings PLO. The legal gateway panel does evidence senior management oversight of decisions to enter the PLO process, but does not give sufficient case direction to support the timely progression of work.

There is significant variability of practice in clearly defining the concerns and detailing timely and measurable outcomes to underpin PLO work, both in letters before proceedings and in PLO meetings with parents. Insufficiently detailed contingency planning indicates that it is unclear whether the threshold for proceedings is met. The frequency with which PLO meetings and reviews are held is not consistent and there is no clear link to child protection or child in need reviewing processes. There is insufficient focus on the key concerns and evaluation of the

progress in PLO meetings. This means that decisions relating to children in this area of work are not made in a consistently timely way.

The voice of the child is clear in the vast majority of cases seen. Visiting is timely and well recorded. Children are seen alone, and a variety of methods and tools is utilised to facilitate communication. The views of children are gained from different professionals and, in some cases, advocates are used effectively and appropriately.

The understanding of the child's lived experience is not consistently detailed, and does not contribute sufficiently to the analysis or planning of interventions.

There is clear evidence of work to engage parents and families, and the increased and effective use of family group conferences to ensure that children are supported within their family whenever possible. Action is also taken to visit out of hours when this has been deemed appropriate to ensure that all family members can be seen. In a small number of cases, work has not been persistent or sustained in engaging absent fathers or other significant males.

The quality of work addressing issues of identity and diversity is variable in cases seen. While some assessments do clearly identify and address issues of diversity, in other cases the issues impacting on the child's identity and place in the family were not considered.

Recent supervision and management oversight have improved in frequency and quality, supported by the recruitment of permanent team managers. This has contributed to progressing work with children and families, including in cases where there has been drift and delay. There were good examples of the use of a nationally recognised practice framework in some of the supervision sessions, with clear direction for workers from managers.

Without exception, workers and managers who shared their views with inspectors are positive about working for the trust in Doncaster. Management support is valued, and leaders are seen and provide clear vision and direction.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Graham Reiter
Her Majesty's Inspector