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Dear John

Focused visit to Durham's children's services

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic.

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Durham children's services on 13 and 14 July. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Louise Hollick and Vicky Metheringham.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in care. The visit focused on the quality of matching, placement and decision-making for children in care, the protection of vulnerable adolescents in care and the experiences and progress of children living in unregulated and/or unregistered provision.

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 while working within national and local guidelines for responding to COVID-19. This visit was carried out fully by remote means. Inspectors used video calls for discussions with local authority staff, managers and leaders.

Headline Findings

The number of children in care in Durham has risen during COVID-19. Performance and quality of practice are strong for most of these children. Most children in care are receiving effective services and support from an assured and committed workforce. There are a small number of children in care living in unregulated or

unregistered care arrangements. While leaders have plans in place to resolve these issues, these arrangements do not provide adequate assurances of the quality of care provided to children currently.

Areas for priority action:

The local authority needs to take swift and decisive action to address the following areas of weakness:

- The quality of plans and arrangements for a minority of children in the care of the local authority living with connected persons
- The sufficiency of suitable placements to avoid children being placed in unregistered accommodation.

Areas for improvement:

- The quality of assessment work carried out under Section 22 (a) to determine that unregulated supported accommodation is the most suitable placement for some children aged 16-17.

Main Findings

There have been relatively high rates of COVID-19 infection in Durham and at the time of the visit, the rate was amongst the highest nationally. This is leading to increased rates of staff sickness and staff having to self-isolate. Staff are working within organised bubbles and have choice around access to office facilities as well as being supported to work from home. This is enabling them to seek manager and peer support in a comfortable and safe way. Leaders are focused on maintaining business as usual while working within the national guidelines and restrictions. This is ensuring that most children continue to receive face-to-face visits from their social worker and plans are progressing without any COVID-19 related delay or disruption.

Social workers are positive about working for Durham. They report good management support and supervision which enables them to discuss issues and make appropriate decisions for children. A strong workforce development strategy has ensured workforce stability. This is helping workers to consistently support children and they have developed positive and informed relationships.

Leaders acknowledge that placement sufficiency is a challenge in Durham and has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. There are plans in place to increase sufficiency through the opening of additional children's homes and foster carer recruitment. In the meantime, a small number of children have been placed in unregistered children's homes, some for a considerable length of time. These

children have complex care needs, which means a registered placement has not been able to be found for them. While leaders have oversight of these arrangements and have plans to register these homes with Ofsted, children are living in these circumstances for too long. The lack of registration means that the care afforded to children in these arrangements does not necessarily meet the children's home regulations and quality standards, and the ability of the carers to meet children's needs and identify risks is unassessed. This also means that children are living in uncertain situations for too long without an agreed permanent care plan.

A small number of children are placed with family or friends who have either refused to have a viability assessment, or for who the assessment outcome has been negative. These children are placed under a variety of legal arrangements, including voluntary agreement, Interim Care Orders and Care Orders, with carers who are unapproved, meaning that these placements are outside the safeguards provided by regulation. For these children, the carer's ability to meet their needs is undetermined due to the lack of assessment as required under regulation. It also means that some of these children are not being secured timely and permanent care arrangements.

Leaders are aware of this group of children and could demonstrate that these children are all being seen regularly by social workers. Despite managers' assertions that these children were all safely cared for, not all of these children had up-to-date assessments or a clear plan to progress their legal arrangements and circumstances. During the visit, managers provided a summary of existing plans to address this situation and the management oversight. Leaders acknowledge that some children remain in these unregulated situations for too long and not enough action has been taken to ensure these children have permanent and secure legal arrangements. This impacts on children's stability, identity and legal rights. It may also affect their access to the appropriate care leaver support and entitlements when they leave care.

Children come into care when they cannot safely remain at home. When children come into care in an unplanned emergency way, there is prompt management oversight and decision-making. Care proceedings are issued promptly, when required. During care proceedings, a variety of robust assessments inform strong decision-making for children. This is helping children achieve permanence in a timely way when they cannot safely return home.

When children are placed in approved foster placements or registered children's homes, there is clear identification of children's needs and appropriate matching is well considered. For these children, there is strong management oversight and decision-making is robust. Children's records provide clear direction of next steps to support timely and robust care planning.

Consideration is given for children to stay with family members when this is appropriate. Most of these arrangements are appropriately managed and assessed, including viability assessment and emergency agreement for temporary approvals.

When children are placed with extended family with parents' consent, there is balanced consideration of whether children are living under a family arrangement or whether they have become children in care who are placed with their extended family. Parents' rights under this arrangement are clearly discussed with them, so they can make an informed decision about their children coming into care and know their rights to remove their children. Parents are encouraged to consult a solicitor, so they are independently advised and empowered.

Most children in care are making good progress. Their assessed needs are understood and addressed by high-quality care plans. Children have access to a wide range of specialised support such as the Full Circle therapeutic team and the Supporting Solutions intensive support team. Care plans are reviewed through timely review meetings. Children and their parents participate in care plans and their reviews when it is appropriate for them to do so. Children's plans contain clear actions and timescales and are written in plain language so children and families can understand the expectations.

Children have been able to maintain links with their families despite the COVID-19 government restrictions. Children's views are taken into account when considering family time arrangements. When children do not want to see their birth parents, their wishes are thoughtfully considered. This helps children feel safe and supported when they have complex family relationships.

When children have to move placement, sensitive conversations are held with the children to help them prepare for the moves and, when possible, introductions are made in advance of the move. This means that children feel prepared prior to moving to new carers. Not all children who have to move have updated needs assessments to ensure children and carers are considerably matched, with the aim of reducing further placement breakdowns.

Children in care are visited where they live and are seen alone. The majority of visits are now face to face, even when children live a considerable distance away from their home authority. Most children benefit from sensitive and creative direct work completed with their social workers or support workers. For children with language or communication needs, direct work is completed to an exceptional standard using sensory tools, or interpreters to aid communication. Action is taken to make changes to care plans as a result of this direct work, enabling children to feel fully listened to and building trust in their relationship with their social worker. For those children who cannot return home to their parents, life story work helps them to understand their family history.

When children in care are at risk of criminal or sexual exploitation or are missing, there is a prompt response to identify, review and reduce risk. Multi-agency meetings ensure good information-sharing for children's risk assessments and clear action plans for crucial times such as weekends. This is helping to reduce risks to

children and improve their circumstances. There has been a rise in the numbers of children in care going missing, partly due to the repeated national lockdowns and the restrictions this forces on adolescents. As a result, an additional missing from home coordinator post has been created. Return home interviews for children are of a good standard and even when young people do not engage in the meeting, the coordinators gather information by communicating with a range of relevant professionals. This helps to inform the plan and reduce risk.

Some 16- and 17-year-olds in Durham are placed in unregulated supported accommodation. These children are monitored and reviewed by senior managers in the performance clinic and a supported accommodation panel. For some children, this is supported by assessment under a pathway plan. Formal assessments of the suitability of the accommodation are not routinely completed for these children. This makes it difficult to ascertain if children's needs are informing their plans to live in this type of accommodation and whether the accommodation is of a high-quality standard.

During the visit, inspectors met with a group of children from the children in care council. These children spoke positively about their social worker and feel listened to and supported by them. Inspectors were impressed to hear about their individual achievements and their promotional activities with key corporate partners. This is ensuring they have opportunities to share their experiences of being in care.

There is frequent senior and operational management oversight of children in care through various panels, performance clinics, supervision and day-to-day recorded management decisions. Management oversight across the service has been increased and strengthened when gaps have been identified. There is wider strategic backing from the corporate parenting panel, who have a keen focus on listening to the views of children in care and young people leaving care.

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

We have notified the DfE of the area(s) for priority action. You should submit an action plan that responds to the area for priority action within 70 working days of receiving this letter. It would be very helpful if you can share an early draft of the action plan with us within 20 working days of receiving this letter.

Yours sincerely

Louise Hollick
Her Majesty's Inspector