

## **Report of the Cabinet Member Children's Services and Schools**

I have been asked to Report by Councillor Connett for Full Council on 22 July 2021 on:

*the Ofsted letter of 15 July 2021 regarding Children's Services in Devon.*

### **Response**

Ofsted inspected the Council's Children's Services on 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> May 2021, as a focused visit under the ILACS inspection framework. This was a standard visit which all local authorities receive regardless of rating, and it covers nine different areas which are set out in Ofsted's inspection framework and are below:

#### **Help and protection**

- the effectiveness of the front door, with specific reference to any rise in and response to referrals, section 47 enquiries and strategy discussions
- the progress of children subject to child protection and child in need plans (those who have experienced abuse, neglect or exploitation)
- the progress of those recently stepped up or stepped down to early help and the exercise of thresholds
- edge of care/pre-proceedings, particularly those subject to a letter before proceedings (under the pre-proceedings stage of the PLO, local authorities are required to write to parents setting out what needs to change if they are to avoid family court proceedings)

#### **Children in care and care leavers**

- the focus on physical and mental health of children in care and care leavers, including how the local authority has maintained contact with the child/care leaver and how they have facilitated contact with families
- placement decisions, including the quality of matching, particularly when sufficiency is a challenge

#### **Impact of leaders**

- the quality assurance of practice and 'line of sight' to the quality and impact of practice with children and families
- management and workforce capacity, including responses to staff well-being
- the effectiveness of leaders in leading and contributing to multi-agency working that leads to effective social work practice

This inspection also looked at our arrangements in response to Covid. The inspection letter was published by Ofsted on their website on July 15<sup>th</sup>.

## Main Findings

Ofsted recognised the strength of partnership working for children in response to Covid, describing how Devon organisations working with children had come together well to provide an effective and well co-ordinated response. They highlighted our good school attendance of all children, and in particular vulnerable children, including those in care and those living with their families as children in need or children on child protection plans. Our school attendance of all these groups of children, including those with special educational needs, both during the pandemic and following lockdowns has been above national average. This is an opportunity to thank all partners, particularly schools, for the tremendous contribution they have made to securing children's education and welfare during Covid.

Ofsted further found that children were seen and supported by social care services during the pandemic, and that those children who are electively home educated, were safe and monitored appropriately.

Our progress in improving some areas of social care that were found wanting in the January 2020 inspection was acknowledged during the focused visit. Specific examples include better use of 'pre-proceedings' and more timely interventions, meaning that children were coming into care at the right time and for the right reasons. Pre-proceedings is the work done to help a family change before it is necessary to seek a court order. Ofsted found that our relationships with the judiciary and with CafCass, the independent social work service representing children in the courts, was much improved since 2020.

Our improved service for care leavers was also recognised, and Ofsted said that young people were starting to benefit from an improved strategic focus, with tenacious staff building good relationships with them. Ofsted also found strengths in our work with children and young people who go missing, and found that senior leaders had responded quickly to areas of concern.

However, overall we agree with Ofsted's feedback in the letter, that our improvement journey is at an early stage (and outcomes for some children who need our help are still poor). This is because there can be delays in children getting the help they need, and we are not undertaking strong enough assessments, leading to insufficiently smart and robust plans for children. Our social work practice is too variable. Since January 2020 there has been an improvement in the overall frequency of audit work, and an increase in the use of performance data, but this has not so far led to consistent practice across differently localities within Devon. There is not enough challenge in the system, for example we are too ready to accept small changes within families as indicators of sustainable improvements for children, and there is insufficient challenge of practice at all levels, including from the corporate centre and elected members. Our evaluation of where the service was at, completed in March 2021, also interpreted small changes as indicators of greater change, leading to over-optimism about progress since the January 2020 inspection. We recognise that our workforce instability is a significant contributory factor, with high levels of agency staff and 30 social work posts currently not filled by either permanent or agency social workers.

We are absolutely committed and determined to get this right for children, and recognise there is a considerable amount of work ahead in order to do so. We have recruited a permanent Head of Children's Social Care, and a significant package of recruitment and retention measures will be going to formal Cabinet in September, to improve our ability to attract, keep and develop the best staff. Our improvement partnership with Leeds, funded by the Department for Education, has started, with an initial diagnostic of our MASH and front door service, and yesterday we held a leadership day with the social care management team. We also have an Improvement Advisor working with us, appointed by the DfE, who is bringing his

experience of taking authorities out of intervention and developing good and outstanding services for children.

We will not rest until our children are receiving the services that they deserve.

**Andrew Leadbetter**

Cabinet Member

Children's Services and Schools