

# Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council

## Re-inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers

Inspection dates: 9–24 November 2017

Report published: 19 January 2018

<b>Children’s services in Doncaster are good</b>		
<b>1. Children who need help and protection</b>		Good
<b>2. Children looked after and achieving permanence</b>		Good
	2.1 Adoption performance	Good
	2.2 Experiences and progress of care leavers	Good
<b>3. Leadership, management and governance</b>		Good

## Executive summary

Since the last inspection, when services were judged to be inadequate, there have been significant improvements in the quality of support for children in Doncaster. The council and Doncaster Children's Services Trust work well together and know their strengths and areas needing further development. The trust is highly effective in developing a culture for good social work to flourish. As a result, the quality of social work is good and is supported by a well-embedded model of social work practice. There is a highly effective performance management and audit programme. Management oversight is visible on files. In the main, social workers receive good-quality, reflective supervision. Social workers and managers all reported good morale and said that they enjoy working in a culture which is challenging but highly supportive with visible and accessible leaders. The voice of the child is impressively an absolutely integral part of individual casework and planning of service delivery.

The majority of the help and protection work is good, and outcomes for children are improved. The response to concerns is robust and ensures that risk is identified in a timely way and that thresholds are consistently applied. There is appropriate management oversight at key decision-making points. Assessments and plans are detailed and timely and highlight historical risks, strengths and protective factors, although a small number of children experience delays in receiving support. Direct work with children is a strength and well embedded in practice.

The voice of the child looked after is powerful in Doncaster. Children only become looked after when it is in their best interests and when all other options have been considered. The trust has a robust sufficiency strategy, although the lack of suitable placement options has recently resulted in some inappropriate placements for a very small number of children. Services from health and education help to support children and promote their achievements and well-being. Social workers know the children they are working with well.

Adoption services are good. Children are considered for adoption at the earliest opportunity. This early identification enables children to be placed in a permanent placement without delay. Timeliness throughout the service has improved. Some of the adoption reports submitted to the adoption panel are not of a good quality. Adoption support is a strength, from direct therapeutic work, through a range of peer support activities, to children's events and clubs.

Support for care leavers is good. The 'inspiring futures' team is ambitious and resolute with the care leavers it supports. The participation and influence of care leavers throughout is excellent, demonstrating that young people are at the heart of the service. Care leavers' achievements are widely celebrated through local events, notice boards and individual letters sent by senior leaders. There is an excellent range of groups supporting care leavers. Leisure passes are, however, only available for those who attend the groups.

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## The local authority

### Information about this local authority area

- The trust operates six children's homes. Four were judged to be good or outstanding at their most recent Ofsted inspection.
- The trust also operates as a voluntary adoption agency and an independent fostering agency. Both were inspected in August 2015 and judged to be good.
- The previous inspection of the local authority's services for children in need of help and protection, including children in care, was in September 2015. The local authority was judged to be inadequate for help and protection services. It was judged to require improvement for services for children looked after, experiences of care leavers, and leadership, management and governance, and was judged good for adoption performance. It was overall judged to be inadequate.

### Local leadership

- The chief executive of the trust has been in post since July 2014.
- The chair of the Local Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB) has been in post since November 2017. The previous chair served from January 2014 to October 2017.
- The director of children's services has been in post since August 2015.
- An independent provider, Doncaster Children's Services Trust, delivers all services for children in need, children in need of protection, children in care and care leavers, with the exception of the virtual school, family hubs and stronger families. The trust arrangements were established by a formal direction from the Secretary of State in 2014. The trust is accountable to the Secretary of State via the trust board chair. Doncaster council acts as the local commissioner with responsibility for contract management. The statutory functions of the director of children's services and lead member are retained within the council.

### Children living in this area

- 65,461 children and young people under the age of 18 years live in Doncaster. This is 21% of the total population in the area.
- Approximately 25% of the local authority's children aged under 16 years are living in low-income families.
- The proportion of children entitled to free school meals:
  - in primary schools is 16% (the national average is 15%)
  - in secondary schools is 15% (the national average is 12.9%).

- Children and young people from minority ethnic groups account for 7% of all children living in the area, compared with 21% in the country as a whole.
- The largest minority ethnic groups of children and young people in the area are White Eastern European, including from the Gypsy and Roma communities.
- The proportion of children and young people who speak English as an additional language:
  - in primary schools is 10% (the national average is 20%)
  - in secondary schools is 7% (the national average is 16%).

### **Child protection in this area**

- At 31 October 2017, 2,977 children had been identified through assessment as being formally in need of a specialist children’s service. This is an increase from 2,646 at 31 March 2017.
- At 31 October 2017, 353 children and young people were the subject of a child protection plan (a rate of 53.9 per 10,000 children). This is a reduction from 427 (65.2 per 10,000 children) at 31 March 2017.
- At 31 October 2017, there were a low number of children living in a privately arranged fostering placement. There have been four children in privately arranged fostering placements in the last 12 months.
- In the two years before inspection, two serious incident notifications were submitted to Ofsted and no serious case reviews have been completed.
- There are no serious case reviews ongoing at the time of the inspection.

### **Children looked after in this area**

- At 31 October 2017, 550 children were being looked after by the local authority (a rate of 84.0 per 10,000 children). This is an increase from 510 (78 per 10,000 children) at 31 March 2017. Of this number:
  - 193 (or 35%) live outside the local authority area
  - 61 live in residential children’s homes, of whom 46% live out of the authority area
  - six live in residential special schools, of whom all live outside the authority area
  - 401 live with foster families, of whom 32% live outside the authority area
  - 13 live with parents (11 families), of whom one child lives out of the authority area
  - nine children are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
- In the last 12 months (1 November 2016 to 31 October 2017):
  - there have been 34 adoptions

- 40 children became subject of special guardianship orders (SGOs), which includes 23 children ceasing to be looked after
- 185 ceased to be looked after, of whom 4% (8) subsequently returned to be looked after.
- 14 children and young people ceased to be looked after and moved on to independent living.
- there is one young person who ceased to be looked after and is now living in a house of multiple occupation
- the casework model used in this area is 'Signs of Safety'.

## **Recommendations**

1. Ensure that all social workers receive high-quality supervision, which is recorded in a timely manner.
2. Ensure that assessments, plans and subsequent actions are completed to the trust's standards for all children.
3. Continue to improve the availability of local placement options and ensure that national guidance is followed when placing children.
4. Ensure that all children looked after and care leavers have easy access to leisure facilities.

## Summary for children and young people

- Children and young people receive good support from social workers in Doncaster. This is a big improvement from previous Ofsted inspections, when services were poor. Three years ago, the government was so concerned about Doncaster that it set up an organisation called the Doncaster Children's Services Trust and asked this group of professionals to make improvements. Since then, the social workers and managers in the trust have worked tirelessly to improve the support being provided to you and your families. Inspectors could see that this support has helped change many of your and your families' lives for the better.
- Listening to your views is at the centre of everything that social workers do, which means that when help is provided it is based on what you have told them will improve your lives. Social workers and other agencies, such as schools, police and health, respond quickly to any concerns that you are not safe or need support. Many of you attend your meetings, supported by advocates, so you can tell people what you want to say. The people who organise those meetings talk to you between meetings. There is very good support to help you remain safely at home.
- Social workers told inspectors that they really enjoy working in Doncaster. Most have good support to make sure that they are doing the best job possible. However, this has not happened for every social worker, and this means that, for a small number of you, support has not happened quickly enough to help you.
- Children and young people only become looked after in Doncaster when it is in your best interests and when all other options have been considered. Most of you live in very good-quality foster homes and children's homes. There have recently been a very small number of children who were placed in homes that have not supported children well enough. Health and education assistance helps you make good progress. However, not all of you have been supported to use local leisure services.
- Support for children in need of adoption services is good. This includes ensuring that there are no delays when it is recognized that children need to be adopted. There is high-quality individual support for children who may be finding this a difficult time and activities with other children, such as organized events and clubs. Support to care leavers is good. The recently formed 'inspiring futures' team knows the care leavers well and organises a wide range of groups to help support you. The 'young advisors' group is excellent at holding the children's trust to account.



<b>The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection</b>	<b>Good</b>
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### Inspection findings

5. Children who need help and protection receive timely and responsive services that keep them safe. Thresholds are well understood and applied, assessments identify risk effectively and most plans provide coordinated child-centred support, using an embedded social work model of practice. The voice of the child is clearly evident in the case record and social workers know their children well. The wishes and feelings of children are at the centre of all decision-making.
6. Early help work is well coordinated across 12 family hubs in four locality areas (0–18). A revised early help strategy has led to the integration of family support services and clearer pathways for parenting support, which ensures timely and targeted support for the most vulnerable families. The introduction of an early help hub encourages all agencies to support children and their families promptly. Early help coordinators provide valued support and training to lead professionals and track the timeliness and quality of work across the wider partnership. Cases are stepped up to children’s social care at the right time. Most early help assessments are detailed and child focused.
7. The trust-led multi-agency safeguarding hub arrangements ensure that decision-making is effective and timely. The introduction of a new online referral form ensures more focused information sharing. There is prompt identification and response to risk. Thresholds are consistently applied. Historical risk factors and early intervention work are captured effectively in order to determine the most appropriate pathway at the first point of contact. Consent is routinely understood and obtained from families. There is appropriate management oversight at key decision-making points.
8. There is good multi-agency attendance at section 47 strategy meetings in the majority of cases. Assessments support high-quality decision-making and examine current risks, previous history and the involvement of wider agencies. Most assessments are timely and include children’s views. Management oversight provides a clear rationale for the plan.
9. Most plans are detailed and outcome focused. Clear danger statements identify risk and protective factors. Most plans provide clear timescales and contingencies, describing what needs to improve. This ensures that families understand the next steps if progress is not sustained. Inspectors saw a lack of timeliness in completing assessments and drawing up plans for a small number of children. However, no child was seen to be at risk due to these delays.

10. Direct work with children is well embedded in practice. Social workers and support workers use a variety of tools to track progress. This ensures that children's wishes and feelings inform assessments and plans. Children are seen alone when appropriate and develop positive relationships with workers. The voice of the child is evident on the child's record, which includes their views and lived experiences.
11. The response to domestic abuse has led to some excellent practice. The 'growing futures' innovation programme has encouraged an ambitious, whole-family approach to tackling domestic abuse, aimed at reducing harm. An executive coaching programme for senior leaders has challenged perceptions of practice, and a new family risk-assessment tool is in development. 'Domestic abuse navigators' use creative approaches when working with high-risk families. Children receive intensive, therapeutic interventions, and work is carried out with perpetrators. Family sessions and direct work with children make a positive difference to their lives.
12. Child protection and children in need reviews are timely. Child protection conference chairs track the progression of plans between reviews. Focus groups with children who are subject to plans ensure that children's views are listened to. Advocacy support is good and well considered for children, and 50% of children over 11 years old attend conferences in person, which is excellent. Core group meetings take place as required, are regular and mostly well attended.
13. Targeted multi-agency support from a dedicated service effectively meets the needs of children at risk of sexual exploitation. The trust's multi-agency 'protecting vulnerable young people' group shares intelligence on local 'hotspots' for child sexual exploitation and missing children. Return home interviews are offered, take up has increased and intelligence informs future planning to reduce risk.
14. Designated officer (DO) responsibilities are effective and show that there is good liaison between agencies when there are concerns that professionals or adults who have contact with children may potentially be putting them at risk. The DO ensures appropriate child-centred decision-making in relation to risk.
15. Private fostering is well promoted across a range of strategic partners. There is engagement with migrant communities to raise awareness. Assessments are detailed, timely and child focused.
16. There is a clear protocol in place to ensure that homeless 16–17-year olds are appropriately assessed and services provided. There is evidence of prompt referral, information sharing and direct work with young people, families and providers.

<b>The experiences and progress of children looked after and achieving permanence</b>	<b>Good</b>
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### Inspection findings

17. Services for children looked after are good. Inspectors saw that children only become looked after when it is in their best interests and when all other options have been considered. Children's views are central to assessments, case recording and their own plans. They are also well represented through the Children in Care Council, 'young advisors' and junior care, forums in which their views are increasingly influential in shaping services. Examples of this influence include renaming of contact to 'family time' and improving services for responding to children's emotional and mental health needs.
18. Since the last inspection in September 2015, robust action has been taken to improve the responses and timeliness of Public Law Outline (PLO) work. The quality of social work court assessments has improved through the use of clear frameworks and revised processes, resulting in better-quality and timelier support. Currently, the average timescale for conclusion of court proceedings is 32 weeks, in line with national performance. Developments are in place to further strengthen the legal planning processes.
19. The quality of social work practice is good. All children looked after have an updated assessment every six months and this is good. The assessments are of consistently good quality, are comprehensive and child focused. In addition, the recording on children's case files, particularly in respect of statutory visits, reflects the positive relationships that social workers have with children and the depth of understanding and knowledge that social workers have about children's lives. However, the quality of children's plans is not consistently good. Actions are not always clear and timescales are not always included in the plans.  
(Recommendation)
20. The independent reviewing officer (IRO) service is strong. From April 2016 to March 2017, the overall timeliness for completion of children's reviews was 99%. There is good evidence of challenge by IROs and a robust focus on quality and outcomes for children, particularly when deficits are identified. IROs are good at including children in the review process, ensuring that their views are heard and acted on.
21. Permanence for children is being achieved in a timely way. IROs monitor children's cases to ensure a focus on permanence. The number of children cared for under an SGO has also increased over time. The quality of SGO and viability assessments provides a detailed and timely rationale for decision-making and highlights a balanced view of strengths and weaknesses, historical factors and parenting capacity.

22. Placement stability is improving. Recent innovations, such as the 'mockingbird' model of support for foster carers and pre-disruption meetings help to promote placement stability. The number of children cared for in a relative and friend foster placement has doubled from approximately 30 in October 2016 to in excess of 60 in October 2017.
23. The quality of placements is good, and a well-focused commissioning strategy ensures that children's needs are well met. However, the lack of suitable local placement options for children who display challenging behaviour and have complex needs has recently resulted in some inappropriate placements for a very small number of children. This has had a negative impact on these children and some of the other children living in residential placements.  
(Recommendation)
24. The role of the virtual school, which is based within the council, has been strengthened and it is becoming increasingly effective in working with social workers and schools to support children looked after in their education. Personal education plans (PEPs) completed by social workers are quality assured by the virtual school team. Completion rates of PEPs and the quality of work are good. The educational attainment of individual children is improving. However, there remains too wide a gap between the progress of children looked after and other children in Doncaster.
25. There have been significant improvements in ensuring that the health needs of children looked after are assessed and reviewed promptly. The response by the trust and health partners in Doncaster for those children who require therapeutic support for their emotional well-being is effective and has been strengthened by a revised protocol. The protocol focuses on providing early support for the emotional well-being of children and has been highly effective in reducing referrals to child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS).
26. The advocacy service has made significant strides in the quality and timeliness of return home interviews. Advocates are resolute, ensuring that children are at the centre of their work and that intelligence from return home interviews is used to inform vulnerability checklists, planning, strategy meetings, disruption activity and support. In October 2017, 95% of children who had been missing were offered return home interviews, compared with 74% in April 2017.
27. The capacity of the independent visitor service has been strengthened, and 40 volunteers are now matched to 43 young people. The service has won national awards for its effectiveness and has been successful in nominating young people for awards. Staff at the service coordinate an excellent weekly meeting to provide support and activities. The service has started a 'pen pal' scheme for any children, in or out of the area, so that the children continue to be informed of events and so that someone is in contact with them.

**The graded judgement for adoption performance is that it is good**

28. Adoption is considered at the earliest opportunity for all children who are unable to live with their birth families. A recent restructure of the service has improved timeliness throughout the range of adoption measures. Performance is now in line with the Department for Education thresholds. When there is delay, this is purposeful, giving time to provide support and interventions for children to ensure that they are ready to move to their adopted placement. Foster-to-adopt placements are increasingly used to ensure that children's permanence is achieved as early as possible.
29. Adopters are recruited and selected through a robust process. Extensive training is provided for a wide variety of topics, with the aim that the realities of adoption are portrayed and adopters are well prepared. The prospective adopter assessments are thorough, although at times too lengthy; core information is lost in the volume of text and they lack succinct analysis.
30. The adoption panel is robust. The minutes clearly detail in-depth discussion and debate to enable effective decision-making about the children and adopters presented to them. Social workers know their children well and carry out creative direct work to support them to move on. However, the child permanence reports presented to panel are variable in quality. This has been recognised by the trust, and work is currently ongoing to increase the quality of these reports.
31. The adoption service has a good track record in placing children who have complex needs and also brothers and sisters together. Family finding routinely explores regional and national options, and the profiling of children is creative and successful. Introductions and 'bump-into meetings' are arranged with care and sensitivity.
32. Adoption support is a strength, supporting children and families at the earliest possible opportunity. The adoption support fund is extensively used to access a range of services to meet identified needs. This is complemented by dedicated adoption support workers who regularly review arrangements and offer ongoing support to children and families.
33. An extensive range of fun activities, youth groups and stay and play sessions is provided. The youth group is child led and creates an environment in which children can access support informally. The activities offer peer-to-peer support and an environment of openness for the discussion of adoption issues. Children have beautifully presented life-story books, which are sensitively produced to ensure that the children understand their journeys. The letterbox system for indirect contact with birth families is robust and provides a thorough and effective service for all involved.

**The graded judgement about the experience and progress of care leavers is that it is good**

34. Care leavers benefit from flexible and creative support offered by the inspiring futures team, which is enthusiastic and ambitious in its approach. All care leavers are 'in touch' with the team. Care leavers develop trusting relationships with their workers, who provide them with individualised support packages. To ensure that care leavers are ready for independence, an effective multi-disciplinary transition programme, 'keys to my future', has been developed by the trust. Care leavers' pathway plans are variable in quality and are lengthy. However, this does not detract from the effective interventions and services provided.
35. When young people are ready, there is a range of suitable accommodation available, with an additional more specialised accommodation to open shortly. The majority of young people remain in suitable accommodation, although the number of 'staying put' arrangements is low. Care leavers receive comprehensive support packages to either maintain or be supported into education, employment and training (EET). Although the number of care leavers not in EET has decreased, this still remains a service priority, and opportunities, such as ensuring that every care leaver has a college place, regardless of attainment, are now being offered. Care leavers regularly access health advice and support and receive detailed health histories. The service is currently trialling an 'app' so that the health histories are accessible when needed.
36. Effective support is offered to care leavers who are at risk of, or involved, in offending, drugs or child exploitation. Support packages are offered and coordinated to reduce risk, involving an extensive range of outside agencies when needed. This ensures that safety plans are effective and reduce risk. In addition, a forensic psychologist based in the team supports young people and workers to offer individualised interventions based on thorough and evidence-based assessments.
37. Information on rights and entitlements is regularly sent out, and conversations take place routinely to ensure that care leavers are accessing their full entitlements. A wide variety of activities is provided to support peer relationships and to ensure regular contact. However, limited support is provided to care leavers who would prefer to access leisure individually. (Recommendation)
38. The achievements of care leavers are celebrated through large awards events locally and nationally. In addition, senior leaders contact individuals to recognise achievements and milestones. A young person stated that 'This shows everyone in the trust cares.'

<b>Leadership, management and governance</b>	<b>Good</b>
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### Inspection findings

39. At this inspection, all services for children in Doncaster are judged to be good, and this is a significant improvement from the findings of previous Ofsted inspections. At the Ofsted inspection in 2012, all inspected services were judged to be inadequate. In response to the findings of that inspection, and due to longstanding concerns, the government commissioned a review into how services for children should be delivered in Doncaster. In August 2013, the Secretary of State directed that an independent trust should be established. The council entered into a contract with the trust to deliver children’s services on its behalf. At the last Ofsted inspection in 2015, help and protection services were judged to be still inadequate. However, progress was evident in services for children looked after and care leavers, which were judged to require improvement, while adoption services were judged to be good. At the time, Ofsted reported that the judgements were a reflection of the progress that leaders and managers at the trust were beginning to make in improving outcomes for children in Doncaster.
40. Over the past two years, significant progress has been evidenced in the regular monitoring visits conducted by Ofsted. This re-inspection has confirmed those findings, that children are being safeguarded well and that most children are receiving a good service, delivered by an effective framework of social work intervention, which places their wishes and feelings at the centre of decision-making.
41. Doncaster Children’s Services Trust has been highly effective in developing a culture for good social work to flourish. The quality of the majority of social work support across services for help and protection, children looked after, adoption and care leavers is now good. This is the result of the robust and determined leadership, management and governance provided by Doncaster Children’s Services Trust and Doncaster council, and in particular by the chief executive of the trust and the director of children’s services. Inspectors saw a commitment to deliver high-quality services from everybody they met – from councillors, senior leaders, managers, workers, support staff, administrators and other agency representatives. It is this joint ownership that has made the most difference to improving the lives of vulnerable children in Doncaster.
42. There is an effective relationship between the senior managers from Doncaster council and the trust. The contract between the council and the trust sets out arrangements for quarterly performance monitoring meetings, which are supported by a suite of performance indicators and an annual review meeting. These arrangements ensure that the council, including elected representatives,

and the trust know well the strengths and areas needing further development in the services for children.

43. Since the last inspection, the role of the corporate parenting board has been strengthened. This is chaired by the lead member for children's services and ensures that there is effective consideration of information and appropriate challenge to further improve services delivered by Doncaster Children's Services Trust. The voice of children is very strong in all aspects of the board's work, driving the service improvements seen on this inspection.
44. Management oversight is visible in the vast majority of case files seen by inspectors. This includes regular review by the heads of service and senior managers. In the main, supervision is regular and detailed and includes reflection, supporting good decision-making and skills development for workers. However, this is not consistent across all teams, and inspectors saw a small number of cases in which supervision had not been conducted, or recorded, to the trust's required standards. (Recommendation)
45. There are highly effective performance and quality assurance systems, which provide a framework to continually improve services. Fifty audits are completed each month by trained and supported managers across the trust. Additionally, thematic audits are routinely undertaken and have recently considered the quality of supervision and the rate of re-referrals. Findings from audits are discussed in regular performance meetings and good practice is celebrated. Prior to the inspection, the majority of issues observed by inspectors had been identified and actions undertaken. Practice development social workers support the learning in teams, and any issues found during the audits can result in subjects identified for the regular 'stop the clock' learning sessions or further targeted support to teams. Recent audits have identified that 61% of the casework is good or better, but, while this is improving, not all children and their families are as yet receiving a consistently good service delivered to Doncaster Children's Services Trust standards. (Recommendation)
46. The quality of responses to complaints is excellent. Managers responding to complaints are provided with support to ensure that they get the response 'right first time'. Increasingly, complaints are resolved quickly. Learning from complaints, and the many compliments received, is now routinely shared with staff across Doncaster Children's Services Trust to reduce the repetition of complaints and to share good practice.
47. The morale of staff who met inspectors was high. In the last three years, recruitment of experienced and newly qualified staff has resulted in the rate of agency staff being reduced to 13.8%, which is now similar to the latest published data of neighbouring authorities. There is a newly qualified social work (NQS) academy, and six workers currently receive high-quality support through these arrangements.



## **Information about this inspection**

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences of children and young people who have needed or still need help and/or protection. This also includes children and young people who are looked after and young people who are leaving care and starting their lives as young adults.

Inspectors considered the quality of work and the difference adults make to the lives of children, young people and families. They read case files, watched how professional staff work with families and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care given to children and young people. Wherever possible, they talked to children, young people and their families. In addition the inspectors have tried to understand what the local authority knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the people who it is trying to help, protect and look after.

The inspection of the local authority was carried out under section 136 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

Ofsted produces this report of the inspection of local authority functions under its power to combine reports in accordance with section 152 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

The inspection team consisted of four of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) from Ofsted and an Ofsted inspector.

### **The inspection team**

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