

Ofsted  
Piccadilly Gate  
Store Street  
Manchester  
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231  
**Textphone** 0161 618 8524  
[enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk)  
[www.gov.uk/ofsted](http://www.gov.uk/ofsted)

4 June 2019

Amanda Lewis  
Corporate Director, People  
Luton Borough Council  
Town Hall  
George Street  
Luton  
LU1 2BQ

Dear Ms Lewis

### **Focused visit to Luton Borough Council children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Luton Borough Council children's services on 9 and 10 May 2019. The inspectors were Margaret Burke, Her Majesty's Inspector and Nigel Parkes, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in care, including disabled children.

Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including children's case records and case discussions with social workers and managers. They met with representatives from the young people's panel. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information.

### **Overview**

This focused visit highlighted the need for improvement. The quality of social work practice and performance is too variable, and improving consistency remains a challenge. Social workers strive to help children in care to remain in placements which meet their needs, promote their education and provide them with stability.

However, placement choice is often limited and some children, particularly adolescents, are more likely to experience frequent moves.

Challenges in maintaining a stable workforce are evident. Caseloads are too high in some teams.

Leaders recognise that performance is not at the desired standard to enable all children to achieve their best in their care. They have developed a coherent recovery plan and have secured investments to help improve services, but more action is required to increase the pace of improvement and ensure that the authority's children's services are effective and financially sustainable.

### **What needs to improve in this area of social work practice:**

- Too many children in care are experiencing multiple changes of social workers.
- Caseloads are too high in some teams.
- Children have too many placement moves, the majority of which are unplanned.
- Too many children have to live a long way from home, making it harder to sustain the continuity of their education, friendships and family ties.
- Children's health needs are not being identified and addressed quickly enough.

### **Findings**

- Children come into care when it is in their best interests to do so. Significant efforts are made to continue to support them within their family networks and, when this is not possible, arrangements are made for them to be placed with alternative carers.
- The pressures of finding suitable local placements has meant that almost one third of children are living in out-of-area placements, making it more difficult to ensure continuity in their education and to support their health.
- The quality of assessments varies considerably. Some are detailed, comprehensive and well written, but many children's assessments lack proper analysis and they do not fully consider the history. They are not routinely updated following changes in children's circumstances, to determine whether further support or a change of plan is required. Chronologies are not kept updated, so do not provide a clear record of the key events and information about children's lives. This is particularly difficult for children who move between different social workers and carers, where their experiences and memories can get lost.
- Children's care plans are too long, tend towards the general rather than the specific and are not clear about who is going to do what by when. This is partly a

product of the care-planning template, but it means that too many plans are not child- or parent-friendly, or easy to understand and use.

- There is evidence of management oversight on children's case records, but managers are not always providing enough critical challenge to ensure that assessments and plans are up to standard and that actions are followed through.
- Pressure from high caseloads within the family safeguarding and 0–17 teams has resulted in delays in progressing some children's plans. This has also resulted in children having work completed by different workers, making it more difficult for them to engage and form trusting relationships with staff during times of change and when they are most vulnerable. Lack of sufficient capacity is preventing more proactive work that could reduce their stresses and result in quicker and smoother transfers into extended family placements.
- Children's reviews are timely. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) are visible and active and are often a consistent figure in children's lives, providing stability and oversight for many when managers and workers have changed. The plans that emerge from these meetings are generally purposeful and relevant. Critical challenge from IROs is helping to drive up practice standards and to avoid drift.
- Only one in three children have an initial health assessment within 28 days of coming into care. While the completion of ongoing health and dental assessments has improved, this has been from a very low base. The response to the emotional well-being and mental health of children in care is mixed. Some children get appropriate support very promptly; for others, this is frustratingly slow.
- The expertise and support of the virtual school is helping social workers plan well for children's education. Children are enabled to remain in school despite placement moves; where this is not possible, they are generally supported well into new schools or education placements. The virtual school maintains close oversight and ensures support to children in care without a full-time education.
- Carers are sensitive to children's ethnic and cultural identities. Placements with brothers and sisters are appropriately considered and contact with family members is well supported. Placement choice is very limited, and this leaves children vulnerable to placement breakdowns. Short- and long-term placement stability needs improvement. While, overall, placements appear to be meeting most children's needs, in the case of emergency placements, this is sometimes more a product of accident than design.
- Leaders have established a sufficiency action plan to improve the volume, quality and range of placements available for children in care. However, the pace of progress needs to increase. There is yet to be a meaningful impact on the recruitment and retention of foster carers. Currently, 121 children in care are living in placements more than 20 miles from home. This has significant

implications for their experiences and progress and makes it harder for social workers and IROs to support children effectively.

- New arrangements to track and monitor permanence plans are beginning to make an impact. Many children are supported to live within extended family networks under Special Guardianship Orders. Increasing numbers of children now know that they do not have to move again and can stay with their current carers. But practice is not yet consistent and, too often, there is a lack of urgency in efforts to resolve uncertainty for children about their future lives.
- Compliance with statutory visiting requirements has improved and most children in care are seen regularly by social workers. However, this does not always result in the consistent relationships that children need.
- Social workers know their cases, and the children they are working with, well. Some workers are excellent at eliciting and acting on children's wishes, hopes and experiences. However, more attention is needed to ensure that all social workers consistently record and reflect children's views.
- Impressive work is undertaken by experienced and knowledgeable staff in the children with disabilities team. Lower caseloads and staff turnover offer greater continuity than in other teams, helping to ensure that children's needs are well understood and that children are seen regularly by workers who know them well.
- The voice of children and young people in care is recognised at the highest levels. Councillors and senior leaders are rightly proud of their young people and they work hard to champion their views. The young people's panel is an integral part of the authority's corporate parenting structure. Like other members, they scrutinise and challenge performance, and put issues that matter to them on the agenda for actions. Successes include the recent development of the senior leaders mentoring programme for care leavers. However, some members of the young people's panel have been left feeling disillusioned by their dealings with the local authority. These young people feel that, while leaders are good at listening, they are not putting things into action quickly enough, so it takes a really long time to get anything done.
- The local authority faces a substantial challenge to secure improvement and ensure consistently effective support for children. Leaders have made some progress in developing services and there is evidence of impact in some areas, although it is clear that weaknesses remain.
- Leaders understand service strengths and weaknesses well and are putting appropriate actions in place. They have strengthened performance management information, providing clearer line of sight to frontline practice. They have initiated peer reviews and are using the feedback given to shape service delivery. The direction provided by the council leader and chief executive officer has helped ensure strong corporate ownership and political backing, securing cross-

borough commitment and resources to take forward a coherent change programme for children's services.

- Quality assurance arrangements have been upgraded but are in the initial stages of implementation and are not yet having enough of an impact to drive improvements in practice and performance at the pace needed. The quality assurance checklists, completed by IROs, offer a useful insight into children's experiences, but case management audits do not always provide sufficiently rigorous critical challenge. Senior leaders have engaged support from another local authority through the national Partners in Practice programme, to help them ensure that auditors are clear about what is expected of them, audit tools are fit for purpose and that the learning from audit activity is properly disseminated and acted upon.
- Caseloads are too high for many social workers. This limits their ability to carry out all aspects of their work with children and their families to a high standard. Senior leaders recognise these staffing and caseload challenges. The recruitment and retention strategy is clearly focused on ensuring there are enough staff in each team. Efforts are made to provide effective support for social workers, including agency staff, and all have access to good training and development opportunities. Recruitment is ongoing and additional posts have been created to increase capacity. However, pressures remain in teams until these additional posts are filled.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning your next inspection or visit. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Margaret Burke  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**