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Katrina Gueli HMI
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Sent by email to: Martin.Samuels@leicester.gov.uk

Annual Engagement Meeting 13 January 2021

Dear Martin

Thank you to you and your team for meeting with Nick McMullen SHMI, Deirdre Duignan SHMI and me to consider your self-evaluation and to discuss developments in children's services in Leicester.

Local authority context

You reflected that since taking up post in March 2020, the city has been in some form of lockdown due Covid-19 for most of this time. You feel children's services have responded well to the challenges this has presented with most services sustained, improvement work continuing and staff showing great resilience. You cited staff and management stability and experience as key factors in this. You also described strong political support from your lead member. The current Chief Operating Officer is leaving for a new post and plans to recruit a replacement are well advanced. The City's aspiration is to achieve excellence in its children's services and you are developing a three-year strategy to help deliver this.

Progress since last full inspection and focused visit

Your last full inspection was in 2017 and your last focused visit early in 2019. These inspections showed evidence of steady improvement from the authority's previous inadequate performance. Your most recent self-evaluation describes how this

improvement journey is continuing, despite the particular challenges of 2020. The self-evaluation is succinct and supported by a range of other documentation. You are confident it provides clear and accurate evidence of your line of sight to front line services. Your progress continues to be overseen by your Improvement Board, which has partner engagement and is independently chaired.

Service Responses to Covid-19

You described how staff and services made the transition to lockdown fairly quickly and how you have shifted between virtual and face-to-face contact over time, in line with public health advice and your individual risk assessments. Some services, such as your contact centre and short breaks, have needed to be curtailed or closed for periods, but overall, you feel you have sustained strong service delivery. You have had relatively little additional staff absence over the period and this remains the case. However, you are concerned about the impact of home schooling and ongoing high Covid-19 levels on staff availability.

Referrals dipped during the first lockdown but steadily increased after this and are now roughly at pre-Covid levels. You have operated a pre-threshold help line to encourage schools in particular to identify and discuss children who may be experiencing hidden harm.

You are pleased with the impact of your edge of care services and hope to build on this through the development of a new multi-agency service. This will be based on the 'No Wrong Door' model but will have a distinctive Leicester approach and title. You felt your engagement in this development was an example of an increasingly outward looking approach in Leicester, reflecting a greater openness and self confidence around service review and development.

Like many local authorities you are experiencing challenges in maintaining placement choice and sufficiency during the pandemic. You have confidence in your internal residential provision and feel in many cases this is providing better value and quality than a number of private providers. You are therefore considering whether to expand internal provision as part of your planning for children's residential care.

You believe your care leaver service continues to develop and improve, although the economic slowdown has created additional challenges to providing these young people with suitable training or employment. We also discussed the importance of recognising vulnerability post-18 and protecting care leavers from exploitation. We noted how care leaver services are also having to evolve to meet the needs of the increasing numbers of young adults aged 21 and over entitled to support.

Summary

Overall, you described an increasingly mature service which knows itself well and is able to respond confidently to new challenges. Over time, although there have been several changes at DCS level, underneath this there has been senior management stability and continuity which you believe has helped sustain a steady path of service improvement.

Inspection Update

Ofsted has now announced that we will resume our extended focused visits in January, and still anticipate returning to routine ILACS from April 2021. Please pass on our thanks to colleagues for their preparation and contributions to the meeting. I look forward to hearing about further developments in Leicester.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "K. Gueli", enclosed within a large, thin, oval-shaped scribble.

Katrina Gueli HMI
Regional Director, East Midlands