

25 January 2019

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Dear Dave

Monitoring visit of Surrey local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Surrey local authority children's services on 23 and 24 January 2019. The visit was the second monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in May 2018. The experiences and progress of children in care and achieving permanence were judged requires improvement to be good. The inspectors were Nick Stacey and Maire Atherton, Her Majesty's Inspectors.

Inspectors evaluated the experiences of children in care, particularly focusing on the achievement of timely permanent living arrangements, and the effectiveness of direct work, assessments, plans and reviews. Inspectors sought to understand whether these measures are leading to better outcomes for children. The experiences of older children in care who are at risk of, and who are experiencing, exploitation were scrutinised to understand the impact of safeguarding responses on reducing the level of risk and harm. Inspectors also considered the local authority's progress towards a better understanding of practice standards through recently introduced auditing and quality assurance activities.

A range of evidence was considered during the visit, including discussions with social workers and managers. Several children's cases were sampled with social workers. Inspectors attended a meeting of the local authority's Ofsted Priority Action Board on the eve of the visit. Inspectors considered the detailed improvement plan, performance management information, the recently implemented reforms of the corporate parenting board and the minutes of board meetings. This was with a particular focus on the quality of services provided for children in care.

Overview

In order to improve the standard of services to vulnerable children, the local authority is introducing a new practice page 33 and service structure. Leaders have planned for these fundamental system changes to be in place by April 2019. Overall,

the effectiveness and timeliness of permanence planning for children who are unable to live with their parents has improved since the inspection, and a range of options, including adoption, placements with extended family members and special guardianship orders, are considered at the same time. The understanding of permanence planning by social workers and the progress tracking of these plans by managers requires further strengthening. The local authority is implementing credible initiatives to consolidate the improvements that have been made.

The effectiveness of management oversight and the standard of social work practice was stronger in one of the two quadrant offices visited. Here, children in care benefit from a comparatively stable management and leadership team and more permanent, longer-serving social workers. Inspectors saw more examples of purposeful direct work with children and frequent and focused management, as well as early, proactive permanence planning.

However, overall, and in accordance with the local authority's own analysis, inspectors found continuing weaknesses and inconsistencies in services for children in care. These included not regularly reassessing changed circumstances and significant events, intermittent and poorly focused case supervision and poorly planned direct work with children.

Findings

The completion and timeliness of initial health assessments for children who become looked after has significantly improved from a very low rate, but further work is required to ensure that all children are assessed within the first four weeks. Senior managers recognised inspectors' findings that many children's circumstances are not regularly reassessed and updated by their social workers for their six-monthly looked after review meetings, or when significant changes occur. The use of chronologies is sparse. This means that many children's care plans are not informed and updated by ongoing evaluative assessments of their progress. However, two assessments for children in care to consider a return home to their parents were thorough and analytical, resulting in successful and enduring rehabilitations to their birth families.

Some children's care plans are specific, with well-crafted actions, aligned with primary objectives to improve their outcomes and achievements. This is not established practice, however, and other plans extensively document children's needs to the detriment of defining sharp, clear actions for the next six months. Early permanence planning is not well documented in all care plans, even when planning is timely and proactive. Contact arrangements for children with family members are carefully assessed, managed and promoted. Children's interests and well-being are of paramount importance when considering ongoing reviews of these arrangements.

The quality of personal education plans for children in care remains poor and the active involvement of the virtual school is insufficient. Purposeful use of the pupil premium remains inconsistent. The impact of independent reviewing officers has developed markedly through increasingly regular midway reviews of progress with social workers, visits to children and regular enquiries about the progress of review recommendations. Most records of children's reviews are clearly and plainly written,

highlighting the contribution of children. Earlier decisions are followed up and further recommendations are concise and achievable.

In two of the four local authority area quadrants that were visited by inspectors, most social workers who were spoken to described accessible, regular and supportive management supervision and guidance. However, this is not well evidenced in most children's electronic case records. Many children's cases show long gaps, often of many months, between planned supervision meetings between social workers and their managers. These shortfalls are more acute in one of the area offices that was visited. The shortfalls mean that there is a lack of guidance for social workers on the content and purpose of their direct work, the review of court work for children in care proceedings and of previous management directions. Another consequence is that some children's care plans reflect drift and delay. Recorded management oversight rarely demonstrates reflective, evaluative discussions with social workers about children's progress, worries, presenting risks and the focus of future work.

Most children in care are visited within required timescales by their social workers. The goals and priorities of direct work with them, other than meeting statutory visiting requirements, are often unclear. Records of visits are not always up to date and many records do not show constructive direct work with children, using resources and tools that might assist social workers' understanding of the children's experiences and progress in their placements. Children's views and comments are usually documented, but these are not routinely developed into evaluative summaries, signposting the focus of further direct work. Social workers' visits are often presented as discrete events rather than purposeful engagements aligned with children's care plans. An understanding of children's diverse backgrounds and identities is rarely evidenced in social workers' records and reports.

Older children in care who frequently go missing and who are at risk of, or who are experiencing, exploitation are reviewed at frequent multi-agency meetings. In two cases seen, these measures were not effective in reducing serious risks for children with the necessary speed and urgency. Senior managers' attempts to escalate police responses encountered resistance. While it is essential that risks of adult exploitation and other dangers encountered by children who go missing are regularly reviewed by senior managers from partnership agencies, it is also vital that all available civil and legal avenues are used to protect children and help them to escape exploitative adults and networks. Efforts to disrupt, pursue and prosecute alleged perpetrators are not always assertive enough.

Many children in care live in safe, nurturing and stable placements which help them to gradually overcome earlier trauma and disadvantages experienced in their birth families. Examples were seen of children flourishing in long-term foster placements, and of their complex and challenging behaviours being skilfully addressed in residential settings. It was particularly encouraging to hear of one child with highly complex needs being elected student representative at their school. The local authority is keenly aware of the need for more children in care to be placed closer to their homes. One plan to improve the sufficiency and retention of local foster carers is the introduction of a programme that is building stronger support networks for foster carers to help them to manage when they encounter challenging periods with children in their care.

The local authority has a more realistic and informed understanding of its performance and progress through a comprehensive, closely monitored improvement plan and improved quality assurance and auditing programmes. A learning culture is emerging across the county, alongside explicit requirements for social workers and their supervisors to meet improved practice standards. A recently introduced auditing framework is providing senior managers with a more assured evaluation of social work practice, enhancing first line managers' ability to benchmark good practice. Inspectors agreed with local authority audit judgements. Senior managers are clear about the large amount of further work required to secure minimum practice standards for all vulnerable children across the spectrum of services, from the 'front door' to services for care leavers. Plans to achieve further improvements over the short and medium term are in place.

Social workers are largely highly motivated about the introduction of the new practice model and service structure. They reported that communication and opportunities to inform the service transformation are frequent and varied. Caseloads in the children looked after teams have reduced significantly in one quadrant area visited, but they remain higher in the other quadrant due to a greater turnover of social workers, capability issues for some staff, and consequent higher vacancy levels.

The model and approach of the corporate parenting board has been revised. The size of the panel has been helpfully reduced to encourage more interactive exchanges. Detailed scrutiny of multi-agency operational performance reports occurs outside board meetings to inform thematic enquiries for the board to consider. Questions are generated and research is undertaken before board meetings to inform assurance-based conversations. These include reviewing action cards received from the children in care council. These measures are gradually securing a better understanding by board members of the lived experiences of children in care and of challenges faced by involved agencies, staff, carers and children. The director of children's services attends the board meetings and the lead member for children chairs these meetings. This demonstrates stronger senior political and management engagement.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Nick Stacey
Her Majesty's Inspector