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Dear Dave

Monitoring visit of Surrey children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Surrey children's services on the 5 and 6 June 2019. The visit was the third monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate, overall, in May 2018. The inspectors were Nick Stacey and Julie Knight, Her Majesty's Inspectors. The local authority has made substantial progress in recently improving both the quality of management oversight and the practice standards of incoming contacts and referrals through newly implemented 'front door' arrangements.

Inspectors evaluated the 'front door', the local authority's initial response to and management of incoming contacts and referrals. This included the 'request for support' team, which is the first point of contact for agencies and the public who have concerns about children, and the single point of access (SPA) service. The SPA responds to contacts that have been referred on to children's services for a decision about what type of support, if any, is needed to help children and their families overcome difficulties and improve their circumstances. The SPA also features an early help hub which considers referrals for supporting children who have been judged to have lower threshold levels of need.

Overview

At the time of this visit, senior leaders and managers had very recently completed the implementation of a new practice model, called 'family resilience', underpinning a widescale planned redesign and restructure of children's services. This affected all frontline staff and managers. This ambitious service remodelling included a total reconfiguration of the 'front door', where new arrangements had been fully operational for only five weeks at the time of the visit. Senior leaders and managers had consulted widely and carefully on the reconfiguration of the 'front door', including with other local authorities, to design a model fitting the context of Surrey with the objective of achieving enduring change. A fundamental aim of the remodelling has already been achieved, with a significant reduction in the previously

high volume of contacts and referrals, and in the number of child protection investigations, child in need assessments and child protection plans. Consequently, social workers' caseloads across the service have substantially reduced to an average of 15 each. Smaller, manageable caseloads are a critical component of Surrey's 'family resilience' model.

The local authority readily accepts that there is further work required to improve practice in some areas identified during the visit. This includes, for example, ensuring that histories of children exposed to continuing harm, through recurring patterns of neglect and domestic abuse, are taken full account of when making further decisions as to what continuing support and intervention are appropriate. Although partnership working is much improved, there are still delays in the timeframe within which police notifications are passed by the police to the 'request for support' team.

Although the widespread service redesign was very recent at the time of the visit, inspectors found that the 'request for support' team, SPA and early help hub are providing increasingly safe, proportionate and well-evidenced initial responses to concerns reported regarding children's safety and well-being. Partnership agencies' understanding and application of new threshold guidance are improving, resulting in them exercising more care and thought to their objectives before making a referral to children's services

Findings

Under the new arrangements, initial contacts to the 'request for support' team are managed well through the careful and appropriate application of threshold guidance. Children at immediate and significant risk of harm are quickly identified and passed on without delay to assessment teams for urgent attention. Decisions to refer onto the SPA, or early help hub, are also consistent with initial threshold levels of need. Police referrals are often submitted to the 'request for support' team some days after police attendance at incidents, resulting in delays for some children who are in need of help and support. 'Request for support team' officers frequently ask social workers for advice on threshold guidance and decisions, but these discussions are not documented to provide written evidence of the reasons. All contacts are reviewed and prioritised by a social worker each day, and staff diligently and promptly check whether children have been the subject of previous contacts. Any history is appropriately weighted in threshold decisions. The volume and pace of work in the team is demanding and senior managers have imminent plans to increase its capacity.

Under the new arrangements, partner agencies can seek advice through a new telephone consultation service when they are considering whether the needs of children require a formal referral to the SPA. This is already enhancing information-sharing, understanding of thresholds, communication and confidence in the 'front door'. Partners can choose whether to disclose the names of children. If the details of children are shared, any information that children's services already know about them is not used to inform whether they meet the threshold for a service, as the

status of the call remains a 'consultation'. Callers may be invited to make a referral when the consultation indicates the issues discussed warrant it, but children who could have significant needs might not have these addressed if callers subsequently decide not to make a referral. Senior managers are actively considering measures to address this potential shortcoming in responding to risk to ensure that there is a proportionate and well-thought-through approach to information-sharing at this early stage.

The early help hub is well managed, employing skilled and professionally curious early help advisers who have a child-centred and evaluative approach. The 'request for support' team applies balanced and proportionate thresholds when it refers children and families to the early help hub. Initial management oversight and directions are thorough and prompt. Early help advisers work efficiently and quickly, speaking to referrers, involved agencies and parents and reviewing any histories of previous contacts and interventions. Parental consent and threshold guidance continually inform their work. Advisers frequently consult with accessible and supportive senior advisers and SPA team managers when children's needs are close to the threshold for statutory social work involvement. Workloads are closely controlled and managed through daily meetings. Timescales for completing information-gathering, recommendations and decisions are routinely met. Advisers' written records and recommendations are reflective and concise, supporting well-informed subsequent management decisions. Access to targeted early help services to address children and family's needs in the four area quadrants is swiftly facilitated when appropriate.

Management oversight, directions and decision-making about contacts that are referred to the SPA service are also increasingly prompt, clear and well evidenced. Consent from parents and carers is largely obtained by referring agencies and is always considered before information is sought or shared in the SPA. Consent is overridden, and the reasons documented, on the occasions this is justified, such as when risks to children are the overarching priority. Social workers in the SPA undertake multi-agency partnership (MAP) information-gathering swiftly and efficiently in accordance with timescale guidance that stipulates that management decisions be recorded within 24 hours. When timescales are extended, the reasons given are justifiable, for example a parent or another agency might be unavailable. Social workers carefully document any earlier agency involvement and what is known about the child and family's history.

Social workers' recommendations are well-written and balanced summaries of information gathered, alongside any previous history. The significantly reduced volume of referrals has led to more manageable workloads in the SPA, facilitating timely and prompt work, and allowing greater reflection, discussion and well-evidenced recording. However, in deciding what type and level of service a family needs, social workers and managers do not always give sufficient attention to recurring patterns and themes within families, such as neglect and domestic abuse. This could lead to some children not receiving the right help that they need.

Police and health partners co-located in the SPA are supportive of the recently introduced changes to the front door arrangements and thresholds of need. They value the morning case discussion meetings to share information and discuss referrals where the thresholds are not clear. A designated early help worker is provided with regular, updated information on children missing from home, school and care by the police each day. This reduces delays in requesting return home interviews, as police reports on missing children are often submitted late. SPA partners have received extensive training and are engaging well in the new practice model and thresholds of needs. Consequently, they are embracing the cultural shift towards respectful conversations with parents, including routinely seeking their consent when considering referrals to children's social care. This has already significantly reduced the number of inappropriate contacts from the police and schools. The local authority has identified emerging improvements in the consideration given by referring professionals to the outcomes they are seeking before they make referrals, including whether a team around the family approach would be a more suitable offer.

Inspectors agreed with the salient areas for improvement and learning themes identified in senior managers' summaries of six cases that had recently been audited. Inspectors met with the allocated social workers for these children during the visit. Social workers said that they have welcomed the reflective meetings with managers that are part of the audit model. They demonstrated to inspectors an ability to reflect on important learning points and a receptiveness to learning and improvement. Social workers told inspectors of the benefits of their recently reduced caseloads.

The local authority has audited over 500 children's cases using an audit tool that invites an evaluative approach from first line managers completing the initial audits. The re-audits of the original audits and senior management moderations are slowly building a more accurate understanding of the quality and impact of social work practice. This ongoing, iterative and highly labour-intensive programme is a critical cornerstone of the local authority's determined plans to achieve a sustained and widespread improvement in social work practice standards. Senior managers reported that they are seeing fewer cases with critical practice weaknesses, although the overall standard of practice signals that much more remains to be done to achieve the strong levels of practice that senior managers are committed to achieving.

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

Yours sincerely

Nick Stacey
Her Majesty's Inspector