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Darryl Freeman
Corporate Director for Children and Education
Wiltshire Council County Hall
Bythesea Road
Trowbridge
BA14 8JN

Dear Mr Freeman

Focused visit to Wiltshire children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Wiltshire children's services on 23 to 24 July 2025. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Sarah Canto, Joy Howick and Shabana Warne.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need or subject to a protection plan.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers and managers. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records and had conversations with partner agencies and family members.

Headline findings

Senior leaders, politicians and partners work collaboratively to bring about positive change for children in need or subject to a child protection plan. Recent well-managed changes in political administration have ensured that the council's strength of ambition for children remains as focused as ever. This ambition is reflected well within the council's top priorities and its plan to become 'child friendly' Wiltshire. Equally, a strong culture of succession planning, commitment and investment have ensured that, during a time of senior leadership changes, services have continued to be maintained or improved for children in need. Determined action against areas identified for improvement at the previous inspection have made a difference, for example, for children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless. Most children who are in need, or in need of protection, make good progress and are supported by effective multi-agency plans. Due to extensive quality assurance activity, and an accurate self-assessment of practice, areas highlighted for development during this visit are already identified as priorities in service plans. The largely permanent workforce is committed and child-focused, led by visible and approachable leaders and managers, who work together to improve the lives of children.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice?

- Timebound actions within children's supervisions records (enabler 2, national framework).
- The consistent use of chronologies to inform care planning (outcome 3, national framework).

Main findings

The impact of the local authority's ambition to identify and address neglect and cumulative harm at an early stage is making a difference for children and is now evident in practice. Social workers' training and expertise in their use of Wiltshire's chosen neglect tool is evident. Where possible, parents are supported to make effective change and improve their parenting skills, alongside diligent support from family key workers. Supervisors and managers are heightened to the importance of reviewing progress and recognising any drift for children.

Children's levels of need are understood, so that they receive the most appropriate support and services. When concerns escalate for children, strategy meetings are held in a timely way to plan protective action, including during out of office hours. The use of strategy discussions is timely and proportionate, with the necessary agencies being involved. Risks are considered and records show effective planning and highlight the necessary actions to reduce risk and harm to children.

Most children in need or core group meetings are concise, held regularly and are attended by relevant family and professionals. Meetings are chaired well, and the effectiveness of interventions are reviewed to measure progress. Records are written carefully to the child in easy-to-read formats. A new independent reviewing officer role to support and improve practice for children in need has been developed to further improve practice.

Children benefit from child in need and child protection plans that are, again, meaningfully written to them and are regularly reviewed. Partner agencies' views are sought and incorporated into plans and a range of appropriate support and interventions are outlined. Most plans are clear and easy to understand, to help families and professionals to keep on track with targets to be achieved.

Visits to children are regular and purposeful, and in line with children's changing needs. Children are spoken to alone and observed, and their wishes and feelings are recorded and inform plans. Records are written in a way that sensitively describes children's needs, likes and relationships and give the reader a clear insight into their world.

For a small number of children, interventions and actions have not been timely or executed effectively. These children have been held at a child-in-need or child

protection stage of planning for longer than necessary. Social work supervision is not consistently effective in providing workers with timebound actions to mitigate against delay and track the effectiveness and timeliness of interventions. Some chronologies are also not complete and do not show the full history of social work involvement. This does not support some social workers and managers in making the best use of chronologies to help them in their understanding and reviewing the impact of cumulative harm. The delay for most of these children has been recognised through management oversight and remedied through proportionate but effective action. This includes social worker re-allocation to focusing on regaining parents' confidence and ensure that planning and actions for these children are now being expedited.

For children subject to pre-proceedings as part of the public law outline, child-centred decisions are aimed at helping children remain in their families or wider networks and be diverted from proceedings. This does not prevent the use of court proceedings when necessary to keep children safe. Of particular note, are the high-quality pre-proceedings letters written to parents. These letters are written in a strength-based way, adjusted according to parents' learning needs, and make clear what needs to change. This approach gives children the best opportunity to remain within their families wherever possible. Effective systems, including edge of care meetings, are in place to ensure that children's needs are fully assessed and that parents receive the support that will help them make the changes needed so children can remain in their care. Pre-birth assessments, alongside skilled specialist parenting assessments, are comprehensive. Parent version reports give parents every opportunity to understand the impact of their care. Managers are actively seeking to increase the number of family group conferences that are regularly offered to families, but not always taken up.

Children who are aged 16 and 17 and present as homeless now receive a comprehensive, robust and unified approach from across the council. An improved joint social care and housing policy is executed well by skilled workers, so that children get the help they need. Holistic assessments consider children's education, health and social care needs, while effectively assessing risks and vulnerabilities. Children are listened to, are supported to have advocacy and their rights and entitlements to be accommodated are explained to them. Urgent, same day action is taken when necessary. When children's circumstances are safe enough, they remain in their current situation while accommodation is being organised that is suitable for their need, and in line with their wishes. In these situations, managers use effective systems to monitor actions taken and share learning when the response to children could be improved. Workers engage with those who are close to children to support reunification or improved family relationships, utilising the skills of the Stronger Families Team. The needs and potential risks to any brothers and sisters are appropriately considered.

Children and families receive intensive, flexible, individual and creative support from the Stronger Families Service. The team builds trusting relationships with children at

their own pace. A range of approaches and models are used to meet the identified needs or risks of each individual in the family and to prevent situations from escalating. Staff's expertise is enhanced by Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), whose advice and guidance help workers support children emotionally.

Children who are at risk of harm outside the home receive carefully planned services by the Emerald team alongside multi-agency partners. When children become older, effective communication is made with adult services. Children often attend their meetings, and consequently interventions have a greater likelihood of succeeding, due to co-produced plans. The risk to children is managed well, and a fifth identifying category of 'risk outside the home' helps identify more clearly the specific risk to children. University research on this team has assisted with further development of this service. When children go missing, return home interviews provide a helpful analysis to guide next steps and what action to take to best protect children.

Supervision of work with children is mostly reflective, regular and focused on impact for children. Purposeful inquiry and support help social workers to achieve planned objectives. A prominent feature of supervision is how children's voices inform planning within supervision.

A regular cycle of extensive quality assurance activity, underpinned by a suite of performance reports, enables the local authority to have an accurate and confident assessment of the impact of practice, which is used by managers to inform top level plans. The auditing process identifies strengths and addresses practice shortfalls that are used well to inform plans and priorities. Learning from audits is regularly disseminated to the workforce to support practice improvement.

Social workers, including newly qualified staff, said they feel listened to and well-supervised, and describe their managers and senior leaders as supportive, visible and present. Workers value opportunities to joint work and learn best practice from colleagues and mentors. Learning and development programmes and flexible working opportunities enable staff to feel valued. Social workers talked confidently about their work and spoke about families with understanding and warmth. They welcome scrutiny and are committed to the children they work for.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning the next inspection or visit.

Yours sincerely

Sarah Canto
His Majesty's Inspector