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Dear Ms Glassbrook

Focused visit to Reading children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Reading children's services on 16 and 17 February 2022. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Alexander Kemp and Amanda Maxwell.

Inspectors looked at the arrangements for children in need and children subject to a child protection plan. This included children subject to pre-proceedings interventions, the protection of disabled children, thresholds and the step up/step down between children in need and child protection.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

Children's statutory services in Reading are delegated to Brighter Futures for Children (BFFC). BFFC is a company wholly owned by, but independent of, Reading Borough Council.

Headline findings

Reading was judged as requires improvement to be good at the ILACS inspection in September 2019. Improvement activity since then has focused on what BFFC terms the four foundations of practice (assessments, visits, plans and supervision). This has not resulted in sufficient improvement. There are shortfalls in many aspects of work relevant to the progress of children in need and children subject to child protection plans that were also identified as areas for improvement at the last inspection.

Progress has been made in discrete areas of practice, but the pace of change needs to accelerate to ensure that all children's circumstances improve. A new approach for social work practice was launched eight months ago, but it is too early to see its impact on children's experiences.

Despite the exceptional challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, visits to children were prioritised and some partnerships were strengthened. The police and health partners are now fully engaged in child protection processes. A stable, visible

senior leadership team remains in place and is committed to improvement. Critical work with disabled children and children subject to pre-proceedings intervention is making a positive difference.

However, not all children make sufficient progress. Assessments focus too narrowly on presenting concerns without consideration of cumulative harm. Children's plans do not always improve their circumstances at the speed they should. A small number of children's plans end too soon and direct work with children is compromised by a focus on adults. Child protection conference chairs and managers do not provide effective challenge when plans for children are not progressing well. Children in need plans are led by unqualified workers as part of a pilot project that received national funding, and which is due to end on 31 March 2022.

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

- Oversight of children in need work by qualified social workers.
- The quality of case recording, assessments, plans and reviews.
- Direct work and intervention with children, ensuring that they are seen alone and have access to an advocate if they wish.
- Supervision, management oversight and the effectiveness of quality assurance.

Main findings

When children are assessed to be at immediate risk, appropriate safeguards are put in place. Assessments are usually completed without delay and are informed by the views of parents and children. There has been an improvement in ensuring that information from health partners and the police informs assessments. This enriches the understanding that social workers have about children's lives and experiences.

Social workers do not sufficiently consider the extent of cumulative harm that children experience, and this leads to overly optimistic assessments of parental capacity to change. Assessments often consider only the last referral and do not take sufficient account of family history. Chronologies are not routinely completed.

A small number of children do not get the intensive help that they need soon enough. When children receive multi-agency support through a child protection plan, this is usually because of an incident, rather than a holistic assessment that identifies the risk of significant harm. Although leaders do not yet fully understand their comparatively high proportion of child protection plans, there is still an impetus to reduce these rates. As a result, numbers have reduced year on year. However, inspectors found that, as in 2019, a small group of children in need required the more intensive support provided by a child protection plan. For some children, plans are ended too soon, before improvements in their lives are sustained.

Plans and reviews are not consistently effective in ensuring that children receive purposeful intervention. Plans are not written well or routinely updated to help

families to understand what needs to change. Too much jargon is used. Leaders are appropriately reviewing the way that plans are written, to make them clearer. Workers do not update plans when circumstances change or multi-agency meetings take place. Network meetings for children in need do not take place regularly enough. As a result, plans do not always capture changing risks and it is difficult to monitor progress.

Leaders have imminent plans to restructure services to reduce transition points between teams. This includes ending a pilot project where unqualified workers take the lead role for children in need. Leaders told inspectors that they had already intended to end this project in March 2022. The approach sits outside of the expectations of statutory guidance and inspectors were assured that this practice would not be repeated.

Parents are not consistently supported during child protection conferences. Some participate alone at home while caring for their children, as these important meetings continue to be held wholly virtually. Leaders recognise that this practice leaves parents vulnerable, and senior managers plan to reinstate in-person conferences from 28 March 2022.

There are limited opportunities for children's wishes to be heard and acted on. Too many children experience a change of social worker. Direct work with children is often limited to brief conversations or observations and this prevents social workers from fully understanding their needs. Most children subject to child protection plans were not seen alone at their most recent visit. Children only rarely participate in their child protection conferences and very few are helped by an advocate, because the offer is not well understood by the workforce.

Work with disabled children is a strength in Reading. Skilled social work ensures that children get the help that they need. All disabled children needing a statutory service receive help from the same team, and this enables long-standing relationships between children, families and professionals to flourish. A bespoke service ensures that older children do not fall between gaps in provision.

Many children's cases are being diverted from unnecessary court proceedings as a result of effective pre-proceedings intervention. Feedback from the judiciary is positive. A minority of children experience unnecessary delays. It can, for example, take too long for the first Public Law Outline meeting to take place with parents and solicitors or for a preferred expert to complete their assessment. The tracker is not effective in highlighting these delays. Potential alternative carers are identified in pre-proceedings to avoid future delay. Inspectors were told that family group conferences will soon be available to support this work.

Children's records are not always comprehensive. It would be hard for adults accessing their childhood files in future to understand the rationale for some decisions, because key documents do not always appear on their files.

Supervision of social workers is not taking place often enough. It is not having sufficient impact on improving practice or identifying what needs to happen for children to make progress. Records are often brief and limited to descriptive updates. Actions are not always identified and are rarely tracked. Oversight between supervisions is rare, even when risks to children escalate. Inspectors asked for a very small number of children's cases to be reviewed during the inspection. The response from leaders was swift and appropriate.

Leaders have made progress in stabilising the workforce and reducing the number of agency staff. There is more to be done to ensure that children do not experience repeated changes of social worker. Social workers feel supported and are trying hard to be champions for children. Caseloads fluctuate but social workers said that they are usually manageable.

Momentum around quality assurance is building, but there is much more to be done before the quality of social work practice is accurately understood. Auditors assess work too positively and moderation does not take place to correct this. Audits do not always take place with social workers and are not informed by feedback from children and families; these factors limit the potential learning opportunities.

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

Yours sincerely

Alexander Kemp
Her Majesty's Inspector