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Dear Mr Ruaux

Focused visit to West Sussex children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to West Sussex children's services on 25 and 26 November 2025. His Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Sally Sinclair and Steve Lowe.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need of help and protection, with a focus on child protection strategy discussions and enquiries, the effectiveness of planning and interventions, and the protection of disabled children.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. The inspectors were primarily on site.

Headline findings

Services to children in need of help and protection in West Sussex have improved since the last inspection in 2023, with strong progress in all the areas identified as in particular need of improvement. The timeliness and the quality of child protection strategy discussions have improved, as has the effectiveness of assessments for children. The response to 16- and 17-year-olds who are homeless or at risk of homelessness is now much better and increasingly attuned to need. Leaders recognise that the quality and effectiveness of planning remain areas for further development, as does the consistency of the response to disabled children who may be at risk of harm. Although some disabled children in need of help or protection are receiving a strong and effective service, this is currently the exception rather than the rule.

An effective director of children's services and his senior leadership team, strongly backed by the local authority's corporate and political leaders, continue to invest in and refine services for vulnerable children, drawing on a good understanding of strengths and areas for development to support progress. This is reinforced by

refreshed and fully embedded quality assurance processes, which enable leaders to benchmark practice accurately and to identify opportunities for further improvement.

Leaders' commitment to empowering managers, social workers and the wider workforce to shape their practice and to make timely, child-focused decisions is fostering a culture of growing confidence and professional curiosity. This is increasingly resulting in work that is purposeful and proportionate and has a positive impact for children.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice?¹

- How consistently plans reflect each child's and family's individual needs, and have clear, realistic and achievable targets. (Outcome 3, national framework)
- The extent to which all staff in the children with disabilities (CWD) service have manageable caseloads that allow them sufficient time to focus on each of the children on their caseloads. (Enabler 3, national framework)
- How well all staff in the children with disabilities service understand the indicators of risk of harm for disabled children, access the additional support and services available to them, and how consistently and effectively these are used to inform assessment, planning and intervention. (Outcome 3, national framework)

Main findings

Leaders, managers and the wider workforce in West Sussex have a strong shared ambition to 'get it right' for children, underpinned by a visible passion and determination. Leaders have responded purposefully to the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection, strengthening practice in key areas and, at times, going beyond simply addressing the shortfalls identified, through creative, child-focused developments that staff understand and support.

This is particularly evident in the continued improvement in the quality of assessments, the strengthened response to missing children and those at risk of exploitation, and the ongoing redesign of services to better align with children's and families' needs. Areas identified as in need of improvement at the last inspection, such as the timeliness and quality of child protection strategy discussions and the effectiveness of assessments, have improved. The response to 16- and 17-year-olds who are homeless or at risk of homelessness has also markedly strengthened.

The use of alternatively qualified practitioners to work alongside social workers is a notable strength. Their expertise in a range of areas, including domestic abuse, adult substance abuse, exploitation and mental health, is helping to embed more consistent, evidence-informed practice. This, alongside a strong and inclusive approach to learning and development, from social work apprenticeships through to

¹The areas for improvement have been cross-referenced with the outcomes, enablers or principles in the [Children's Social Care: National Framework](#). This statutory guidance sets out the purpose, principles for practice and expected outcomes of children's social care.

leadership development, reflects an organisation that values its workforce and prioritises continuous improvement for children. This means that children generally receive a service that is timely, well matched to their needs and risks and is effective in improving their safety and welfare.

The early identification of need, including for unborn children, is a strength in safeguarding services. Practitioners generally build respectful, trusting relationships with children, parents and carers, tailoring direct work to learning needs and individual circumstances.

Social workers and alternatively qualified practitioners also identify longer-term and chronic need effectively, ensuring that timely and proportionate support is put in place. Work with families facing significant and multiple vulnerabilities, such as long-term street homelessness, substance misuse and domestic abuse, consistently helps parents to understand the impact of these issues on their children. This effective support reduces the likelihood of risks escalating and enables many children to safely remain with their families.

The use of family network meetings contributes significantly to positive outcomes for many children, although they are not consistently applied by the CWD service.

Threshold guidance, to determine the type and level of intervention with children and their families, is applied consistently and in line with national and local guidance, with workers showing a strong awareness of cumulative risks, particularly when domestic abuse, substance misuse, trauma and chronic instability intersect. This enables timely escalation to child protection planning and legal processes, when this is necessary, across almost all areas of practice.

Management oversight is typically purposeful and decision-making is timely, evidence based and firmly focused on children's best interests. Social workers and other practitioners do well at assessing needs in response to emerging risks, including when children go missing repeatedly, reduce engagement in education or are at risk as a result of exploitation, neglect, domestic abuse or parental substance misuse. This results in robust reviews and the effective use of safeguarding panels to inform complex planning, particularly when children are at risk of exploitation.

However, the quality of understanding and the focus that reviews and the panel bring are not always reflected in the plans themselves. Plans are, at times, overly detailed or lacking in clarity, and do not consistently translate agreed priorities for change into clear, concise and achievable targets. Consequently, they are not always sufficiently family friendly or easily understood by professionals, which can limit their effectiveness.

Although social workers identify children's needs arising from disability well, the response to safeguarding concerns for disabled children is not yet as timely or as effective as it is for most other children. Typically higher caseloads, coupled with a

less confident understanding of child protection indicators and risks, limit the consistency of practice. Supervision and management oversight tend to focus predominantly on those needs that relate to children's disability and do not always have an equally strong focus on those relating to their wider welfare and safeguarding, or draw effectively on the wider network of practitioners and resources available.

When social workers for disabled children take a holistic approach that looks beyond disability, prioritises safeguarding and draws on a wider range of resources, they can deliver sensitive, effective practice and good-quality direct work that improves outcomes for children. When stronger practice is evident, the outcomes reflect the impact. Leaders recognise the need to strengthen practice in this area, however, progress to date has not yet matched the stronger improvements seen across wider services for children in need of help and protection.

Senior leaders play a proactive and effective role in bespoke support packages when these are needed. Legal gateway decisions and safeguarding panel guidance provide clear direction when children's situations are complex, preventing drift and maintaining proportionate, outcome-focused planning. Management oversight of reviews and child protection strategy discussions for older children shows active attention to escalating risks, supporting stable and targeted interventions.

The consultation for practitioners across agencies provided by the family safeguarding panel is enabling practitioners to deepen their analysis, draw on specialist expertise, and so apply the chosen model of practice in West Sussex with greater confidence and impact, focusing on wraparound support and reducing escalation. This has improved continuity and strengthened the quality and impact of help provided.

The virtual school has a strong understanding of its extended duties and applies this effectively. It takes decisive and targeted action to support social workers and education providers to closely match provision to children's needs. For some children, this has led to a sustained increase in attendance, which reduces risks by improving children's visibility and engagement in learning, resulting in stronger progress and greater stability in their daily lives.

Staff report that changes brought in since the last inspection have resulted in positive cultural and practice improvements. While transformation is ongoing, staff express confidence in leaders implementing change collaboratively. High staff retention is a notable success, leaving the service in a strong position to consolidate improvements and continue progressing practice.

Leaders have a clear understanding of the service's strengths and areas for development. The key challenge remains developing consistency across all areas of practice, to ensure all children receive equally high-quality, timely and child-centred support.

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

Yours sincerely

Sally Sinclair
His Majesty's Inspector