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Dear Ms Fair

Focused visit to East Sussex children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to East Sussex children's services on 30 to 31 July 2025. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Rodica Cobarzan, Steve Bailey and Zafer Yilkan.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need and child protection planning.

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

Headline findings

Children in need in East Sussex, and those who are the subject of a child protection plan, are receiving services that make a positive difference for them and whose effectiveness is being continually developed.

The senior leadership team, with strong corporate support, continues to invest in services for vulnerable children. Leaders have continuously developed and refined services to ensure they have a positive impact on children's lives.

There is a strong focus on providing integrated, multidisciplinary support to children and families. This approach ensures that children and families benefit from consistent, high-quality practice that supports their progress and improves their lives.

There is relentless focus on supporting a stable and committed workforce, enabling staff to develop their skills and feel valued within the council. Leaders are actively creating the right conditions to strengthen social work practice and improve the quality of services for children and families.

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

- The timeliness with which child protection strategy meetings are held, as this is not consistently timely for all children (outcome 3, national framework).

Main findings

Children and families receive support and intervention at the appropriate level for their needs. Children benefit from ongoing assessments and interventions that are strengthened by a multi-agency approach, particularly through the involvement of specialist staff who work with adults and are focused on domestic abuse, mental health or substance misuse and family group conferences. This approach helps improve children and families' circumstances and reduce risks.

When children's circumstances do not improve, and risks increase, appropriate action is taken promptly for most children to protect them and prevent harm.

A small number of children experience delays when a child protection strategy meeting is required. However, when risks are urgent, the holding of strategy meetings is consistently prioritised. As a result, these few children do not benefit at the earliest opportunity from plans created by a multi-agency network to reduce risk while the investigation is ongoing. Once held, child protection strategy meetings are attended by the relevant professionals, who appropriately consider the level of risk and the impact on the children involved. There is timely progression to child protection conferences when required.

Children's plans are proportionate to their identified needs and provide clear information on how children and their families will be helped. Most plans have specific measurable timescales. Safety planning is proportionate, realistic and well recorded. Plans are created in collaboration with families and professionals, and build on the strengths and resources within the family's network and the wider community.

Meetings such as child in need meetings, core groups and child protection conferences are held regularly and well attended by key partner agencies and family members. These meetings support effective information-sharing and allow plans to be adapted in response to the families' changing needs. Child protection chairs provide effective oversight of plans through midway reviews. Minutes of meetings are clear. They have a strong child focus, while remaining sensitive towards parents.

Social workers build meaningful and trusting relationships with children and their families. The local authority's chosen model of practice is well embedded, with social workers consistently delivering thoughtful, creative and kind support. Visits to children are tailored to their individual needs and often take place more frequently than the statutory timescales.

Direct work with children informs their plans and reviews well, and is supported by a wide range of tools and observations that help to capture and understand children's lived experiences. This work is further strengthened by the involvement of connected family intervention practitioners and connected coaches, Swift and other adult-facing

workers who, together, form a strong network of support that delivers life-changing work for children and families.

Children's social workers involve family members from the earliest stages of interventions, even before the formal family group conferences take place. They support everyone involved to contribute to sustainable changes that the wider network is working on achieving together.

When the support provided to children by a child protection plan is not sufficient to safeguard them, there is timely escalation into the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline. This is an area of practice that has improved since the last inspection. Letters before proceedings are used appropriately to help parents or carers to understand the concerns and what actions need to be taken. There is effective oversight of children's welfare and the difference that interventions are making through the process. Families are offered an increased level of support and services from a multidisciplinary team. Kinship assessments are enabling an increasing number of children to remain safely within their family network.

Children on the edge of care but not receiving support through the pre-proceedings process can also benefit from exemplary and transformational support from an integrated multidisciplinary team of social workers, connected coaches and therapists. As a result, many children are supported to remain living at home with their families.

The local authority response to children living in private fostering arrangements has improved since the last inspection. All children now receive timely visits from social workers and assessments are completed promptly to support with decisions about these arrangements.

Social workers consistently use a neglect toolkit to better understand the impact of neglect on children and to help to ensure that support and decision-making take into account and are focused on children's lived experience. Well-co-ordinated, multi-faceted help is provided promptly, with its impact kept under regular review. Social workers remain curious about the underlying needs of parents as causal factors, when there are concerns about neglect. They build strong relationships that allow them to revisit difficult or sensitive conversations, ensuring that interventions are best targeted to promote sustainable change. For a very small number of children, interventions are less timely, and the cycle of neglect is repeated before decisive action is taken.

Social workers in East Sussex generally receive timely and appropriate supervision, although there is some inconsistency in the quality of recording. Social workers report that supervision provides valuable support and opportunities to reflect on practice. In most circumstances, records capture the necessary information to support families' progress. However, actions set in supervision are not consistently

reviewed, which limits the ability of managers and staff to effectively evaluate progress made.

The strong and comprehensive quality assurance framework is supported by a wide range of audits, including monthly systemic, thematic and multi-agency audits. These provide valuable insights that contribute to the local authority's continuous improvement plan. Leaders are aware of areas for development, including the need for greater consistency in the incorporation of feedback from children and families, as well as in how monthly audits capture the quality and impact of direct practice.

Alongside qualitative information to understand and strengthen practice, leaders are making good use of quantitative information. While existing performance management systems are used well, they rely heavily on the manual extraction of data and data analysis which is resource intensive, and does not support managers and leaders as well as they might and could act as a brake on continued progress.

Leaders have a clear understanding of their strengths and areas for development. The local authority's self-evaluation is reflective and demonstrates a commitment to learning, developing social work practice, and responding to areas where development is needed. This understanding has been used by the Director of Children's Services and her wider leadership team to drive ongoing improvement in the quality and impact of services for children.

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

Yours sincerely

Rodica Cobarzan
His Majesty's Inspector