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Dear Steve,

Focused visit to Hampshire children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Hampshire County Council children's services on 31 January and 1 February 2023. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Naintara Khosla, Andy Whippey and Kathryn Grindod.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in care.

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

Headline findings

At the last inspection, in May 2019, the overall effectiveness of services was judged to be outstanding. The continuing commitment of political and corporate leaders to deliver effective social work services is evident in the investment the council has made to increase social work and placement capacity for children in response to rising demand and sufficiency pressures since the pandemic. It is a great credit to the stable, trusted leadership team and to frontline managers and practitioners that the quality and impact of practice for children in care continue to be impressive.

Care plans and visits confirm children are making good progress. Most children are well matched with their carers, live in stable long-term homes and their education needs are met. It has been a challenge to ensure that health assessments are timely for children in care. The local authority continues to hold health partners to account to address the delays, but further progress is needed. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) regularly hold reviews. High workloads are impacting on their capacity to fulfil the range of functions required. The local authority has developed its concept for the children in care council, but the voice of children in care is not sufficiently informing the corporate parenting committee work programme. The senior leaders have gripped the challenges of social worker recruitment and retention and placement sufficiency with intelligent and practical strategic planning, which is leading to an

effective response to children's needs. Social workers are effusive about working for Hampshire and appreciate its employment offer.

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

- The timeliness of initial and review health assessments for children.
- Independent reviewing officer workloads.
- The voice of the child in the corporate parenting committee.

Main findings

Hampshire has not been immune to the pressured national context for the delivery of children's services. The post-pandemic environment has included a significant increase in the volume of referrals and some increase in the numbers of looked after children. The local authority is currently caring for 1,827 children.

A comprehensive, mature quality assurance system gives senior leaders and managers an accurate view of performance, including assurance that children are visited, have appropriate plans and that assessments of children's needs are in place.

Social workers are knowledgeable, confident and child-centred in their discussions about children and their needs. Their practice is inclusive of the child's wishes and feelings, ensuring they have a meaningful voice in decisions that affect them. Practitioners have a good understanding of the complex legislative framework within which they are operating and this helps them to ensure the most appropriate court orders are sought, so that children feel safe and secure in their homes. Kinship relationships are actively promoted, with extended family members approved as foster carers or becoming special guardians where possible.

Children live in stable homes. Their carers and consistent social workers build meaningful relationships, know their children and advocate for them effectively. Family relationships are given due weight and consideration so that children in care continue to have the benefit of relationships that are important to them. Family time is usually well considered and planned, with the child's best interests in mind. When children are unable to see family members, sensitive work helps them to understand why. Brothers and sisters have opportunities to live together when this is in their best interests. For example, inspectors saw children carefully nurtured to move from residential care, with an intensive support network, to living in foster families with brothers or sisters. Disabled children benefit from appropriate provision which meets their often complex needs. When the stability of a child's placement is threatened, meetings are held and support packages are made available which include the offer of intensive support workers, who assist in strengthening placements.

Children's placements are chosen with careful consideration of any potential for children to go missing or face the risk of exploitation. When such concerns are apparent, appropriate referrals are made to specialist services to reduce risks to

children. This includes children living out of area. Exploitation risks for children are identified well. Risk assessments are prompt, help to quantify levels of risk for children and are regularly reviewed. When children go missing from care, their carers take appropriate action to try and locate them, and to welcome them home when they return. Children in care are offered return home 'conversations' following episodes of going missing. Social workers encourage children to explore why they go missing, although this is not always successful.

Hampshire has been welcoming unaccompanied asylum-seeking children as part of the National Transfer Scheme, and those children who spontaneously arrive within Hampshire's borders. Children receive prompt and effective support to meet their cultural and religious needs. Social workers assess the risks of trafficking and take action to minimise concerns. Children are helped to secure legal representation and access Home Office advice, so they obtain the documents they need to help them settle into life in the UK. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are provided with support to contact their families in their country of origin. This provides emotional reassurance for them.

Direct work with children, including disabled children, is a significant strength in Hampshire, with case records thoughtfully written to the child. Skilled practitioners use a range of communication techniques to help engage with disabled children. Children who are traumatised and isolated benefit from the tenacity and relentlessness of their social workers, who are persistent in their efforts to engage and support them, even when emotions are heightened. This supports children to have their voices heard. In one example, a child was able to write to the judge and confirm the care plan they wanted.

Social workers take account of culture and religion. They use interpreters when children's first language is not English and ensure that written materials are translated for them. Social workers talk authoritatively about their assessments and have good insight into children's needs when considering their living arrangements and education provision.

Children's educational needs are considered well. The virtual school works closely with social workers, making sure that personal education planning meetings take place regularly and set appropriate targets for children. The virtual school supports social workers to secure educational placements for children in care, whether they live locally or further afield. The senior leaders are implementing a new electronic personal education plan to strengthen target setting and better measure children's outcomes. Children have access to a wide range of interests and activities which support them to do well and achieve.

Social workers create strong relationships with children through direct work with them. This gives them good insight into children's wishes and views, and an understanding and compassion which translates into sensitive, timely care planning. Assessments and plans are written to the child and are thorough. Their 'My Life My

'Future' plans are crafted with pictures of the child, their interests, history, wishes and feelings, and they outline next steps. However, workload pressures are hindering IRO oversight of care plans. Looked after reviews happen regularly, although not all children are seen by IROs before their reviews. Leaders recognise the need to strengthen the IRO intervention.

Many children wait too long for initial and review health assessments, so carers are not always aware of children's full health needs. Leaders have worked proactively with health partners to tackle this issue, but more progress is needed. When health assessments are delayed, social workers and carers make sure that children nevertheless receive appropriate healthcare in the moment and that they can access specialist services if necessary. Children's mental well-being is carefully considered. Social workers are able to access a range of therapeutic services so they can tailor support to individual children's needs.

Inspectors spoke with children in care, who were delightful and engaging. Children can see their social workers as often as they like, can contact them when they need to and know how to raise a complaint. All felt their social workers listen to them.

Hampshire invests in its workforce and takes action to ensure that social workers' concerns are listened to. Leaders addressed pressures on social workers' caseloads in the autumn of 2022. Additional recruitment of social workers is underway to manage caseloads in the children in care service. Effective strategic plans have ensured social workers have sufficient time for them to develop lasting, meaningful relationships with an appropriate number of children.

Social workers access a wide range of training on top of their individually allocated five days of continuing professional development. This supports them to develop their skills and expertise. Social workers greatly value the supportive environment in which they work. They speak highly of their managers and colleagues. Although supervision records do not always record timebound actions or reflections, this has not impacted on the quality of social work practice or affected care planning for children. Social workers articulate the importance of reflective practice and timely responses to children. Whether permanent employees or agency staff, social workers are proud of what they do and love working for Hampshire local authority.

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

Yours sincerely

Naintara Khosla
His Majesty's Inspector