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Carol Cammiss
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Dear Ms Cammiss

Focused visit to Wokingham Borough Council children's services

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic.

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Wokingham Borough Council children's services on 16 and 17 June 2021. The inspectors were Nick Stacey, Kate Malleson and Kendra Bell, all of whom are Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI).

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children who are subject to child in need or child protection plans.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. However, the delivery model was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 context. This visit was carried out fully by remote means. Inspectors used video calls for discussions with local authority staff, managers and leaders. The lead inspector and the director of children's services agreed arrangements to deliver this visit effectively while working within national and local guidelines for responding to COVID-19. Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information, audits of current practice and children's case records.

Overview

Significant improvements have been made for children who are subject to child in need and child protection plans since the local authority's children services were last inspected in June 2019. A stable senior management team has achieved considerable advances in the quality of social work practice and outcomes for

children. These reforms have not been adversely impacted by the considerable challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Social workers are benefiting from reduced and manageable caseloads that are enabling them to do meaningful direct work with children and their families. Consequently, many children are safer at home and their circumstances have improved. A new specialist service for children at risk of coming into care, called the Compass Team, is demonstrably preventing breakdowns in family relationships.

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

- All audit recommendations should be followed up and the impact of moderation needs to be consistently evident.
- The length and complexity of plan and review records.

Findings

Child in need and child protection plans extensively document the changes that need to happen for children to be safer at home, and to improve their day-to-day experiences. The plans are very clear for parents, and involve professional workers in outlining how progress will be reviewed and assessed. The timescales for completing work are prominently highlighted through milestone check-in points, including when the plans will end if work progresses well. This transparency is helpful for parents and carers through providing a forward view of the programme of help. Safety plans consider all the known risks to families and children, and all the involved parties help devise very detailed contingency measures. Social workers carefully explain difficult and sensitive issues to parents and children, and this helps to promote their engagement. It reduces any resentful feelings that the plans are an unreasonable imposition on their private family lives.

Children's circumstances are managed at the appropriate level of intervention, and they are stepped down from child in need plans or escalated up to child protection plans in accordance with their changing needs. Regular reviews of child in need and child protection plans are highly effective meetings that actively engage parents and children and most of the involved agencies. The local authority's practice model has a strong emphasis on encouraging all parties to contribute both to the understanding of risks and needs, and, in subsequent reviews of progress, towards meeting measurable and achievable outcomes for children. The plans are dynamic and flexible tools that are reshaped in reviews as children's situations change through the work done with them. Many, however, are lengthy and complicated. Managers are aware that shortening the length of the plans will help parents to understand the main points more easily. They are currently looking at how to reduce the complexity and length of plans, while retaining their helpful depth and specificity.

Child protection conference chairs are increasing their scrutiny and influence between review conferences, through more contact with social workers to discuss

children's progress and holding increasingly regular midway reviews. When children's circumstances do not improve, or deteriorate further, proactive decisions are taken to escalate their cases into the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline, or to commence care proceedings. Careful reviews are held of accumulating evidence, preventing children's conditions declining to a level where they experience sudden and upsetting emergency removals from their parents' care. This is particularly important for children who endure neglectful parenting, where very specific evidence is often gathered and recorded. While serious efforts are made to address complex parental difficulties, the needs of children are kept paramount.

Children's voices, identities and experiences, and their wishes and hopes for the future are at the forefront of plans, reviews and management decisions. Social workers are genuinely interested in children and try hard to build strong relationships with them. They represent the wishes and views of all brothers and sisters living in larger families and demonstrate this clearly in written records. A range of activities and tools are used by social workers to seek children's views. These include playing with younger children and detailed observations of babies and infants. Social workers in the disabled children's team actively seek to understand the communication systems of non-verbal children. This enables them to recognise how some of their feelings and preferences are demonstrated through their behaviours. Senior managers acknowledge that there is more to do to equip social workers to use children's augmentative communication systems more confidently, in order that they can engage directly with non-verbal children.

Social workers engage parents and other adults caring for children effectively, including those who avoid and resist social work involvement. Difficult and honest conversations are conducted in a respectful way, resulting in many parents working collaboratively and openly with social workers. This opens more possibilities to undertake work that leads to a better understanding of children's needs and promotes the active participation of parents and carers in programmes to improve their parenting skills. Network meetings with extended family members are routinely held at early stages. These meetings engage family members who often go on to provide important support and care for children, including becoming their special guardians. Social workers have strong and constructive professional relationships with the parents of disabled children. They advocate effectively on their behalf, securing essential resources such as adaptations to their homes, suitable housing, respite care and school transport.

Concerted efforts are made by social workers to engage separated birth fathers in their children's lives, when it is safe and appropriate to do so. This helps children develop more rounded identities through rebuilding relationships with their fathers. Skilled and persistent culturally sensitive practice successfully addresses parental resistance to stopping inappropriate use of physical punishment. Social workers demonstrate a sophisticated knowledge and understanding of the harmful impact of domestic abuse on women and their children. This provides opportunities to help women, and male victims and perpetrators, to better understand healthier intimate relationships.

Intensive and impactful interventions are provided by skilled, specialist social workers and practitioners in the new Compass Team. This work helps prevent breakdowns in family relationships, reducing the likelihood of children entering public care. The team is at an early stage of development but is building trusting relationships with children and their families, helping them to better understand complex difficulties. A systemic approach, supported by a psychologist, is opening new avenues for families to develop different and more positive ways of talking with each other and resolving their problems and conflicts. Workers in the Compass Team visit families frequently, including during the evenings. They gather well-informed insights into children's lives, providing sound evidence for care proceedings in the event that these are necessary.

Diligent and widespread use of the local authority's practice model is increasingly enabling social workers to work appropriately with families and children at lower levels of intervention. This approach promotes parental trust and participation because they see that social workers try their best to work alongside them. Skilled frontline practitioners are holding and managing risks with greater confidence. Inspectors did not see any evidence that decisions are based on over-optimistic assessments of parental capacity to change.

Frontline managers closely review the work undertaken with children in regular supervision meetings held with social workers. Reflective discussions are held, although these are not consistently well documented in case records. The structure of supervision meetings is closely aligned with the local authority's practice model, and the records are also very lengthy. They comprise, however, a very detailed and accountable record of the pace and progress of work with children. Social workers reported that managers are easily accessible for daily consultations and are very engaged in supporting children's progress and well-being. Management decisions, following significant events and changes, are well recorded.

Competent and skilled social workers appreciate the improvements that senior managers have made to the practice environment over the last two years. Consequently, many social workers enjoy working for the local authority and have worked in the local authority for significant periods of time, including a high number of locum social workers. Social workers were promptly and well supported in adapting to remote working following the onset of the first pandemic lockdown in March 2020. Annual turnover rates of social workers have significantly reduced, resulting in fewer children experiencing unhelpful disruption.

The consistent application of the local authority practice model, reduced caseloads and more stable, permanent senior and frontline managers are providing solid foundations for an improving practice culture. The practice model provides a shared professional language across the local authority and in most partner agencies. Senior leaders are also enabling systemic training for many staff, further enriching the quality of social work practice. Senior leaders are ambitious and determined to

construct pervasive high-quality evidence-based practice, building further on the strong platform already in place.

Senior managers' understanding of frontline practice is underpinned by rigorous analysis of comprehensive weekly, monthly and quarterly performance information. A well-designed quality assurance framework features a broad range of mechanisms to evaluate and continually develop practice standards. These include practice weeks, group supervision and collaborative audits, conducted alongside social workers, and regular feedback from parents and children. The value added by the moderation of audits is not consistently apparent. Recommendations of audits are not always checked to ensure that they have been followed through.

Social workers and managers at all levels benefit from a wide portfolio of practice and management training and learning, which includes training and ongoing coaching regarding the local authority's practice model. Learning priorities are often derived from themes identified through quality assurance activity, such as working with complex families and systemic and trauma-informed approaches.

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

Yours sincerely

Nick Stacey
Her Majesty's Inspector