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Dear Eleni,

Focused visit to Slough children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Slough children's services on 13 October 2020. The visit was carried out by Her Majesty's Inspectors Nicola Bennett, Rachel Griffiths, Amanda Maxwell, Nick Stacey and Paul Williams.

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.

The methodology for this visit was 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. The majority of this visit was carried out on site. Four inspectors were based in children's services offices, sampling children's case records with social workers, managers and leaders who were office based. Inspectors also used video calls to speak with schools, foster carers, children and young people, and local authority education staff. The lead inspector, chief executive of the children's trust and director of children's services agreed arrangements to deliver this visit effectively, while working within national and local guidelines for responding to COVID-19 and meeting the needs of the local authority's workforce.

This visit looked at the quality and impact of decision-making in help and protection, children in care and care leavers' services, together with the impact of leadership on service development.

Overview

Slough Council's children's social care statutory functions are delegated to the Slough Children's Services Trust. Earlier this year, leaders, working with the Department for Education, identified significant practice shortfalls across children's services. To address these, a rapid improvement plan was developed and implemented. This has led to improvements in a number of areas, including the timeliness of visits and completion of assessments. However, leaders have more to do to ensure that they have a clear understanding of the quality of social work practice and the difference this makes to improving children's circumstances.

Effective collaborative working and planning by leaders across the children's trust, council and wider partnership enabled early return to standard arrangements for the delivery of children's services. Staff and managers have shown a clear commitment to safeguarding children, demonstrated through the swift return to face-to-face visits, informed by appropriate COVID-19 risk assessments. These have helped ensure that children are seen in accordance with assessed risk and need, while also providing workers and managers with reassurance about personal health and safety.

Working regularly across services with schools and carers, the virtual school has been instrumental in promoting continued learning for children, both at home and in their return to schools. The virtual school has supported children's continued learning during the lockdown period through the distribution of over 300 laptops. Regular weekly meetings have taken place between schools and leaders in the trust and council. This has enhanced understanding about the fast-changing pandemic to inform planning and decision-making in relation to school openings and the prioritisation of vulnerable learners.

Responses at the front door to referrals are timely and proportionate. In the MASH, staffing capacity is sufficient to meet the increased demand experienced in the last six months. Despite high caseloads in the assessment teams, the quality of work is consistently high. However, practice weaknesses remain in a number of key areas. High turnover of staff in some teams limits opportunities for children to develop positive and meaningful relationships with workers. Children in need of help and protection do not always get the help they need at the right time. Delays in progressing child protection plans and Public Law Outline (PLO) processes mean that children often wait too long before their circumstances improve.

Most children in care and care leavers live in suitable homes that meet their needs. Social workers and personal advisers (PAs) visit regularly and know them well. Throughout the lockdown period, children and young people have been supported to have contact with their families and have been helped by staff and carers to keep safe and well.

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

- the quality and timeliness of assessments, planning and interventions for children in need of help and protection
- the effectiveness of PLO processes.
- learning from case file audits
- the stability of the social care workforce.

Findings

1. Referrals are reviewed and responded to promptly in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). Appropriate thresholds are consistently applied. Effective partnership arrangements and diligent social work practice support timely sharing of information to inform next steps. Skilled and experienced managers in this part of the service provide clear direction and bring additional rigour to decision-making.
2. Families in need of early help received timely and appropriate support. When concerns escalate, families are stepped up to statutory services at the right time. Children's services responses are prompt and proportionate. When it is determined that the threshold for statutory intervention is no longer met, effective, joint planning between social workers and early help practitioners ensures that families receive timely interventions to address assessed need.
3. When children may need protection, enquiries are timely and well coordinated. Strategy discussions, held virtually, are well attended by agency partners. Effective information-sharing informs clear analysis of risk and, in the majority of cases, clear action planning. As part of enquiries, children are seen and spoken to alone. Clear safety planning ensures that children are safeguarded. Decisions about next steps are proportionate to risk, need and children's individual circumstances.
4. In the assessment teams, despite high caseloads, staff work diligently to maintain consistently sound practice. Social workers in these teams undertake timely assessments that effectively evaluate children's circumstances. Short-term, direct interventions provided by workers make a difference to the lives of children and their families, reducing need and building resilience. A high number of children experience delays of up to six weeks before their plans progress, due to capacity issues in the receiving long-term teams. It is testament to the commitment of social workers and other staff in the assessment teams that, while children are awaiting transfer, visits continue to be undertaken to them to provide immediate support and ensure their safety.
5. Practice in the children in need (CIN) and child protection (CP) teams is generally weak. Inconsistent and sometimes slow recognition and response to children's immediate and longer-term needs have resulted in delays in achieving timely improvements in their circumstances. Assessments seen in this part of the service are not completed in a timely way and are generally of poor quality. The majority

include scant information from which to understand the child's experiences, resulting in poor risk analysis and planning.

6. The trust has recently undertaken a review of PLO processes for children on the edge of care and in care proceedings and has put in place measures to strengthen this area of practice. Nevertheless, too many children continue to drift at this stage, and a significant number of these delays are very protracted. While some delays are COVID-19 related, this is not the primary cause. Improved management oversight of this work is not yet demonstrating effectiveness.
7. Referrals are responded to promptly at the front door for children at risk of harm outside their family network. The child exploitation coordinator, based in the MASH, provides a coherent initial response and works effectively with other professionals to identify, evaluate and provide direction in relation to initial risk. However, children who have identified risks that are associated with exploitation are not consistently receiving an early, well-coordinated approach to support them in managing, minimising or learning about the impact of exploitation. The trust has recognised the need to improve its response to child exploitation and is restructuring services to provide a multi-agency team to respond to the risks associated with child exploitation.
8. Most vulnerable children and young people have been well supported throughout the lockdown period. Early in the pandemic, concerted effort was made to ensure that children continued to be seen by their social workers and PAs. COVID-19 risk assessments put in place for all children have informed the type and pattern of visiting. Early acquisition of personal protective equipment (PPE) and information technology (IT) equipment has facilitated a mix of virtual, doorstep and face-to-face visiting by workers, while also maintaining a focus on safeguarding.
9. Clinicians, who are based in teams across children's services, are highly valued by staff for the advice they provide to inform plans and interventions, as well as working directly with children, young people and families. Along with the virtual school, they have provided an enhanced service to children in care and care leavers to promote their emotional well-being. Where children are placed out of the local authority area, clinicians liaise effectively with professionals from other areas to ensure that appropriate, timely support is provided. These interventions lead to improved experiences for children and young people.
10. Social workers and PAs have worked determinedly to maintain communication with children and their families, both within and outside the local authority area. Care leavers are supported well by PAs who have been persistent in remaining in touch and have increased visiting in the light of identified vulnerability and risk. Most care leavers spoken to feel that they had the right amount of support and contact from their PAs during the lockdown period, and all valued the weekly virtual contact with each other, facilitated by the participation officer. Relationships between children in care, care leavers and family members have been promoted, and contact has been maintained or enhanced through a variety of mediums, including face to face and virtually.

11. Achieving placement sufficiency has been a longstanding challenge in Slough. Identifying the most appropriate home for children and young people has been more difficult during the lockdown period. Despite this, most children are living in high-quality homes that meet their wider needs and provide long-term stability. Where there are potential shortfalls, social workers and carers, as well as clinicians, anticipate these shortfalls and put in place interventions and services to mitigate them. However, when children are placed in an emergency or move in an unplanned way, they are not always well prepared, and decision-making can be reactive. As a result, a small number of children and young people do not experience the stability and security that they need.
12. The virtual school has maintained strong links with carers and schools during the period of restrictions put in place as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Foster carers and school leaders hold the virtual school in high regard and have valued the regular communication and support they have received to assist children to continue their learning at home as well as at school.
13. Children in care have been supported well to continue learning. Personal education plans are detailed, capture children's views and have continued to be reviewed throughout the lockdown period. Learning advocates from the virtual school provide effective advice, and so children's education targets are proportionate. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the proportion of care leavers who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) to rise. The trust has recently appointed a post-16 employment and training advocate. This newly created role has shown some early signs of having had an impact on mitigating the effects of the difficult economic situation on care leavers, with almost all the 28 young people who have completed year 11 securing training opportunities.
14. Leaders have introduced a more rigorous system for identifying children who are not in formal education. As a result, the numbers identified as missing education have increased. Over the past 12 months, the number of children being electively home educated has also risen. Improved tracking systems, in partnership with regular communication and collaboration with school leaders, are increasingly effective in promoting children's return to attending school.
15. A wide and detailed range of performance information and data is available to leaders to assist them in understanding service strengths and areas for improvement. Managers have utilised this effectively, implementing a range of performance improvement measures, which has been successful in increasing compliance with the timeliness of visiting, completion of assessments and supervision in recent months.
16. Opportunities to better understand the experiences of children through activities such as practice week have been reduced by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, learning from previous 'deep dive' activities and case reviews has been disseminated across the service and has informed service developments to improve responses in relation to specific issues such as neglect.
17. Leaders recognise that there is more to do to understand the quality of practice, particularly in relation to children in need and care leavers, through the better

use of case auditing activity, and to ensure that findings from these individually and collectively drive up the quality and consistency of practice to improve experiences for children and young people.

18. The quality of management oversight and challenge varies significantly across children's services. While supervision is now more regular in the CIN and CP teams, this is not yet consistently leading to improvements in the quality of practice and timeliness of interventions. For some children, this leads to significant delay in the improvement of their circumstances.
19. Turnover of staff has been steadily increasing month on month, reaching 34% in August 2020. This has had an impact on social workers' ability to develop meaningful relationships with children and young people. There is a range of interim and permanent staff across services. However, at the front door, most interim staff and managers have been in their role for a significant period of time. This has promoted stability as well as opportunities to embed practice improvements.
20. Caseloads in the majority of teams are manageable. However, in the assessment teams, caseloads have been too high for a significant time. The impact of this on children has been mitigated by highly committed workers who have worked excessive additional hours, and this is unsustainable. In response to this, senior leaders have acted to introduce additional interim teams. This has been effective in reducing caseloads, which, while they remain too high, are on the right trajectory.
21. Social workers reported that they have been well supported during the lockdown period, with opportunities to work from home and come into the office on a rotational basis. At the early stages, leaders worked closely with managers and workers to keep them connected and safe, thereby mitigating potential isolation. This has helped to keep a sense of 'team' among staff, has built resilience and kept sickness levels low.
22. Concerted and coordinated effort has been undertaken by leaders to anticipate and put in place plans to ensure continuity of frontline service delivery to children in Slough. Leaders have had a clear focus on ensuring that children are safeguarded. The decision not to employ staff who were unwilling to undertake face-to-face visits was, in the light of staff vacancies and caseload pressures, bold but understandable. Taking this decision has effectively promoted opportunities for children to be seen and heard and have their circumstances and risk assessed first hand.

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

Yours sincerely

Nicola Bennett
Her Majesty's Inspector