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Dear Ms Riley

Focused visit to Staffordshire County Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Staffordshire County Council children's services on 26 and 27 May 2022. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Lisa Walsh and Andy Waugh.

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

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers, and meetings with managers and a child protection chair. They also considered local authority performance management and quality assurance information.

Headline findings

Since the last ILACS inspection in 2019, when the overall effectiveness of the service was good, children in need of help and protection continue to receive services that respond to their needs. Assessments and plans are mostly effective in improving outcomes for children. Leaders have led the workforce effectively through a structural transformation of services, with a focus on consistent relationships between social workers and children. This is despite the impact on services of the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated challenges of virtual working and staff absence.

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

- The quality of case supervision records, to ensure a consistent focus on planning for all children.
- The maintaining of timely recording on children's case files, to accurately reflect children's experiences.

- The effectiveness of the audit process, to improve outcomes for children.
- Ensure that accurate performance data is used effectively, to improve social work practice.

Main findings

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the local authority and partners have continued to support and manage risk effectively for the most vulnerable children and families. Since December 2021, there has been increased pressure on services due to the numbers of children and families presenting with complex needs and higher levels of staff absence.

Children are seen regularly by their social workers, who understand their needs well. Most visits are purposeful and social workers have meaningful discussions with children to understand their wishes and feelings. For younger children, social workers use observation well to understand relationships within the child's family.

Appropriately focused direct work supports children to build trusting relationships with their social workers and family support workers. Social workers develop positive relationships with most parents, enabling them to understand concerns and what needs to change. Where relationships have been more challenging, social workers are persistent in their engagement with parents, ensuring they maintain a focus on children.

Social workers have a clear understanding of children's experiences and how risks or concerns impact on their development. The majority of assessments are detailed, with a clear evaluation of strengths and risk. For most children, the impact of family history is understood in relation to current circumstances. Information gathered from partners contributes to a clear analysis of risks and needs. The views of children and adults are threaded throughout the assessment and address all the needs of children, including those with complex needs or disabilities. Most outcomes of assessments lead to plans that are child-focused and enable parents to understand what needs to change. However, in a small number of assessments, the focus is more on the adults' needs than the child's. This means that children's needs are not always prioritised.

The majority of children and families receive services that are delivered at the right level, and when children's or families' circumstances change so does the level of support. Effective partnership working contributes to the reduction of risk and meets needs for children. Partner agencies and families consistently attend and make a productive contribution to multi-agency meetings. Review records show detailed discussions with parents about concerns, progress and what needs to happen next. For most children, plans result in services and support to families that make a positive difference and improve children's outcomes. Most plans consider children's needs well and include wishes and feelings. Actions are mostly specific to individual children's needs; however, timescales are not consistently used to monitor the progress of plans, meaning that some children experience drift and delay.

When children's lives are not improving, most benefit from early decisions to escalate into pre-proceedings and, where appropriate, to initiate care proceedings. Senior managers ensure effective review of the Public Law Outline through the legal gateway meeting, which provides consistent decision-making. The meeting identifies where specialist assessments are required to inform next steps and support the timely application of proceedings where necessary. The work completed in pre-proceedings is effective, helping most families to reduce risks and enabling their children to remain at home safely. Letters before proceedings are usually clear, focusing on the individual needs of children. Letters are specific in what support has been offered and why the concerns are escalating, enabling families to be clear of what is expected of them. However, for some children where circumstances do not improve, there is not always a timely escalation into pre-proceedings, leaving some children in neglectful situations for too long.

Children and families are offered detailed packages of support from family practitioners who are skilled in developing relationships. Appropriately focused direct work has helped maintain a very high proportion of children who remain at home or return to the care of their family. When this cannot be safely achieved, and it is in their best interests, children come into care. Senior managers oversee decisions for children to come into care. Decisions are timely, well considered and based on comprehensive risk assessments. Social workers respond effectively to each child's situation, whether on a planned or emergency basis, improving outcomes for children.

Social workers have access to comprehensive training opportunities and feel well supported by team managers. Supervision is held regularly for most social workers, with a focus on children's progress. Social workers report that supervision supports them to reflect on their practice and offers challenge where appropriate. However, for the majority, this is not reflected in supervision records. These records are poor, lacking detail of children's experiences and reflection on practice. For some children, there is little evidence of team managers recording actions that will progress children's plans. Due to this lack of oversight, there is potential for children's plans to drift.

Despite a high level of commitment, some social workers are unable to consistently complete quality work because their caseloads are too high. Social workers told inspectors that they are further hindered by the local authority's electronic recording system because it is time-consuming and difficult to navigate. Some social workers also reported having to work in their own time to stay up to date with recording. This is leading to some case records not contributing to a comprehensive record of children's experiences. This means that children will not have a clear understanding from their records of how decisions were made about their lives.

With a lack of social work capacity in some teams, there is delay for some children in progressing their plans and receiving appropriate support, due to an inability to transfer to a new social worker in a timely way.

Social workers report that senior managers are visible and accessible. The service benefits from an experienced senior leadership team that has the support of political leaders. Services for children have remained a high priority and this is evidenced through significant financial investment, which has supported a recent transformation of children's services. Senior leaders have reviewed the new structures and understand the challenges of increased caseloads and delays in transferring work through the system due to staffing capacity. To address these issues, plans are in place to recruit to additional social work posts and administrative support posts.

Senior leaders are aware of the continuing challenges regarding the different reporting systems that contribute to the performance management and accuracy of children's data. A new performance management system is intended to address this and is currently being implemented. It is too soon to see the full impact of this.

The quality assurance framework provides managers and senior leaders with a line of sight on practice. Audits are taking place regularly and are embedded in managers' practice. However, at present, audits are completed by the social workers' team manager, which does not provide a level of independent scrutiny. This results in a blurring between the role of team manager and auditor, making it difficult to understand which part of the process has the impact on improving outcomes for children. When areas for further learning are identified, the current moderation process is not effective in ensuring that learning is shared and outcomes improve for children. Senior managers are aware of this and have plans to address the shortfalls.

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

Yours sincerely

Lisa Walsh
Her Majesty's Inspector