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Dear Ms Khan

Focused visit to Isles of Scilly children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Isles of Scilly children's services on 19 and 20 July 2022. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Tracey Ledder and Joy Howick.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need and those subject to a child protection plan. This included the arrangements for early help.

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

Headline findings

As a result of the location and size of the local authority, the ability of the relatively small workforce to provide good services for children is vulnerable to the impact of staff turnover or sickness. Senior managers do not have a robust business continuity or contingency plan in place to address this fragility. Under pressure, they have at times been unable to deliver consistently good-quality services.

For several months, and due to a specific set of unforeseen circumstances including staff turnover and absence, oversight by leaders has been weak and statutory responsibilities have not been met well enough. Although sufficient management capacity is now in place, services are not yet good enough and the detrimental impact of this for children and families continues to leave a legacy of weaker practice. The local authority remains vulnerable to the impact of staff turnover.

Poor record-keeping by staff and a cumbersome electronic recording system means that children's records are generally weak. There are recent signs that the quality and consistency of record-keeping is improving, however, records do not yet consistently put children front and centre of social work practice.

Managers have strengthened the provision of services by separating early help from statutory social work intervention. There are early indicators that this is improving the accessibility and timeliness of services for children and their families. More recently, most children and their families are benefiting from increasingly effective social work intervention.

The local authority is actively engaging with several other authorities and organisations to strengthen its improvement planning.

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

- The child-centredness of social work practice, particularly in decision-making, assessment, planning and children's records.
- Business continuity and contingency planning, to ensure the consistent availability of both social work support to children and families and effective management oversight of that work.
- The quality of recording in children's electronic case files.

Main findings

A lack of availability of social work management towards the end of 2021 and the early part of 2022 has resulted in weak oversight and inconsistent decision-making. There has also been a lack of appropriate challenge to other agencies. Managers have not been available to quality assure children's assessments and plans. Due to the lack of workforce capacity, children with additional needs and disabilities who are in receipt of financial support, and other additional support such as short breaks, do not have up-to-date assessments. This means that for some children new and emerging needs are not identified and supported at the earliest point or as effectively as they could be.

Managers do not provide staff with reflective supervision and effective management oversight. Despite these shortfalls, staff have shown real dedication and have worked hard to support children and their families to get help. This has played an important part in ensuring that, at the time of the visit, there were no children at immediate risk of harm.

Many children who required management decisions to be able to access services have experienced drift and delay. For some, this has had a negative impact, as they have not received the right help in a timely way or, for a very few children, at all. Due to these additional pressures imposed by gaps and turnover in staffing at a senior level, the benefits for children and their families of the local authority's preferred practice model and strength-based approach have been reduced.

Mostly, children's records are weak; they focus too heavily on process and do not routinely give a clear account of children's circumstances. For example, in key documents such as assessments, plans and records of child protection strategy meetings, it is not always possible to understand why decisions have been made and

actions agreed, as the rationale for them is rarely recorded. This means that even though staff can explain the rationale for decisions verbally, children who access their records in the future may not fully understand why certain decisions were made.

Audits of children's records do not consistently identify the key issues or appropriate actions. In addition, audits are completed in isolation, without the involvement of practitioners, partners or children and their families. As a result, there are missed opportunities for feedback to inform learning and address identified shortfalls in practice, to improve the quality of work with individual children or at a service level.

Leaders have recently appointed an interim manager. This has brought increased stability to staffing arrangements and an improved focus on quality assurance and improving practice. There is a collective approach and shared desire to bring about change and implement the new service model. Partners report that practice has improved since the social work team has become more secure. However, at this point, most key social care practitioners are not permanent members of the team.

Leaders know their strengths and weaknesses well and this is helping to drive improvement. Given the relative geographical isolation of the local authority, it is positive that they have an outward-facing approach. They are actively working with a number of other local authorities and organisations and are keen to learn from them. There is a service level agreement in place with another local authority which provides some external scrutiny. Leaders know what the priorities are and are now acting to make the required improvements.

Changes made by managers to provide early help outside of statutory social work are positive and have reduced the number of children who need to access statutory social work support. Thresholds for intervention are now becoming clearer, as leaders implement a new framework for the provision of services that has been refocused on joint working with partner agencies and providing early help.

The early help arrangements are in their infancy and so are not yet fully embedded. Early help assessments completed by the local authority and other agencies are variable in quality. While some are well focused on children's needs, the majority are not yet good enough. Some can be repetitive and do not analyse information to fully understand children's circumstances. Early help plans are brief, but mostly appropriately matched to the needs of children and families. Partners can contact the social work staff easily and this facilitates effective and timely step-up and step-down for children and their families when they move between early help and statutory support.

Overall, younger children and their families are benefiting from the early help and support on offer to them. Families have access to a range of professionals, and they can hold helpful conversations and ask questions. For example, the dentist visits a play-and-stay session and talks to children and their families about dental care. This initiative has not only strengthened children's access to dental care as part of

universal services, but it has also enabled the dentist to make an effective contribution to more targeted early support. It has resulted in children having access to the dentist, despite the pandemic. Likewise, children with emotional needs have quick access to mental health services.

Early help processes are continuing to strengthen but are not yet clear and consistent. Leaders have a plan in place to improve and embed early help with their partners and the community, but this is at a relatively early stage and so impact is inevitably limited at this point in time.

More recently, the additional pressure on the social worker has reduced. This has allowed her to focus more on work with each of the children and families she is supporting. As a result of this, and of the increased management oversight that she is now receiving, there are improvements in the quality and consequent impact of social work with children and families. In particular, assessments and children's plans are now of a better standard. This provides clearer information for families. Mostly, there is a good balance between working alongside parents but also challenging them to think about their part in their children's current circumstances.

The social worker knows children well. Children benefit from effective therapeutic play and direct work. However, the impact for children is not always evident in their records. The social worker is visible and accessible and has established herself well in the community. Parents and children told inspectors that they trust her, and they provided examples of positive changes to their lives because of her involvement.

The social worker makes sure children and families are now seen on a regular basis that reflects their levels of need. Interventions take place while assessments are being completed. This means that circumstances for most children are improving more quickly. Most parents and children spoken to by inspectors provided positive feedback and articulated well what has changed to make their lives better because of the social work involvement.

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

Yours sincerely

Tracey Ledder
Her Majesty's Inspector