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Deb Austin  
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Dear Deb

### **Focused visit to Brighton and Hove children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Brighton and Hove children's services on 24 and 25 February 2020. The inspectors were Maire Atherton and Amanda Maxwell, two of Her Majesty's Inspectors.

During this visit, inspectors evaluated the local authority's arrangements for children subject to child in need and child protection plans. They also evaluated the effectiveness of transitions between these plans and into pre-proceedings under the Public Law Outline.

A range of evidence was reviewed, including case discussions with social workers, managers and parents. Inspectors looked at case records and local authority performance management and quality assurance information.

### **Overview**

At the last inspection in July 2018, overall effectiveness was judged to be good, but the experiences and progress of children in need of help and protection required improvement to be good. The recent internal appointment of the interim director of children's services, supported by the previous director, who has moved to a new role in Brighton and Hove, has ensured that the stable and consistent team of senior leaders is maintained. They have built on what was working well and have taken steady steps to improve. Although positive changes have not always been achieved at the pace leaders hoped for, the measured approach has proved to be effective. Senior and first line managers, and frontline practitioners, have worked with partners to ensure that changes in practice for children in need of help and protection are achieved and sustained. Small social work teams, called pods in Brighton and Hove, are embedded, are valued by social workers, and are working well.

The implementation of a new children in need strategy in October 2019 is proving to be largely effective in ensuring that the same priority and attention is given to this work as is given to child protection work. This is seen in the increasingly frequent visits to children and the now consistently broad multi-agency attendance at child in need network meetings. In most cases, these meetings are also now sufficiently regular.

In most instances, the rationale for decisions made to move child in need work to child protection and vice versa is well articulated and proportionate. There is well-balanced consideration of risk. When children's needs escalate, decisive action is taken to ensure that they are safeguarded. However, strategy discussions in response to new or increasing concerns for children already open to a social work pod do not routinely involve all the right agencies. This means that next steps may not be fully informed by all the relevant information. Senior leaders had already identified this and are awaiting a response from the health commissioner.

While there has been an improvement in the quality of some case recording, for example children's chronologies, too many records of visits to children lack depth or relevance to the plan. Senior leaders and staff have been actively involved in the development of a new IT system, due to go live in September 2020. This, alongside a carefully considered programme of case record redesign, indicates that social workers will have increased options for how visits and direct work can be recorded.

The Partners in Change (PIC) hub, a multi-disciplinary team that has been in place for a year, is proving to be successful in supporting social workers with the development of plans and targeted interventions in their complex work with children and families.

### **What needs to improve in this area of social work practice**

- Multi-agency attendance at strategy discussions in response to child protection concerns about children who are already open to the service.
- The recording of visits to children to ensure that these effectively capture children's experiences and voices and are relevant to the plan.
- The follow-up to audits to ensure that the actions required are implemented to improve practice.

### **Findings**

- The majority of children benefit from timely visits. However, records of visits do not always capture the rich detail used by social workers when they describe their interactions with children. In a minority of records, the voice of the child is loud and clear, using children's own words. This includes views gained through the use of advocacy in child protection processes. However, in too many cases children's

voices are not central to recording. The current pilot that promotes writing directly to children in plans, meetings and reviews is having a positive effect by bringing children to the forefront in these records.

- Vulnerable and at-risk adolescents benefit from thoughtful, creative and well-planned work that is focused on securing their engagement and participation. This is supported by effective multi-agency team work. Staff listen to children and make plans with them that are informed by careful consideration of risks, for example by supporting an older adolescent under a child in need plan, while ensuring that the nature and timeliness of visits and network meetings reflect the level of risk. The child accepts this approach and it has empowered them. The majority of strategy meetings for children who are supported by the social work pods are limited to social care and police, and so do not have the benefit of full multi-agency contributions.
- Assessments and section 47 enquiries are usually completed in good time. In most assessments, children's histories are captured well, informed by up-to-date chronologies. The views of family members and professionals working with children are evident, and relevant research is referenced, alongside concerns. This detail underpins the clear analysis and rationale for recommendations. For most children, assessments are updated before reviews, both for children in need and children subject to a child protection plan. However, not all child in need assessments are updated to reflect changes in circumstances or to ascertain whether there have been changes, in particular in the newly formed 0–25 disabilities service.
- There is some variability in the quality of plans. Stronger plans are written in language that is easy to understand. The actions fit with the concerns that are outlined in the assessment, so families know the support that is to be provided, and who has to do what, and by when, to achieve the desired outcomes. In a minority of plans, this is not the case, so families have less clarity, potentially impeding their ability to understand progress.
- Reviews of plans are informed by participants in the well-attended core groups and network meetings. The rationale for transitions between child in need and child protection planning is well articulated, with thoughtful consideration of next steps. Consistent partnership attendance at these reviews ensures that all are up to date with what is happening for the child. This also enables ongoing professional participation at the right level, for example in identifying a lead practitioner for a team around the child.
- There has been increasingly more effective tracking of cases in the pre-proceedings phase of the public law outline since the last inspection. This has been achieved by formal quarterly meetings and frequent oversight by managers of live performance management reports. As a result, leaders and managers have a good understanding of the progress of this work with children and their families. This has also ensured that children are not subject to pre-proceedings for longer

than necessary and has appropriately reduced the number of families that are subject to pre-proceedings interventions, with some moving towards proceedings and others stepping down.

- The PIC hub brings together a range of specialist professionals to support social workers who are working with children and families with complex needs. This includes mental health and substance misuse practitioners for children and adults and the early parenting assessment programme. Parents spoke very positively about this programme. They said they do not feel judged and are well supported through the relationships formed with them, and the practical help and advice they are given. This has provided them with opportunities to reflect on and understand what they do well, what they need to do differently and the impact of their actions on their children.
- Staff say that they feel very well supported and that the relationship-based model of social work is working well. They describe managers as accessible and open to challenge. The mixture of individual, group and reflective supervision supports staff effectively to explore and review case work and case planning. There has been an improvement in the frequency and recording of case supervision, but there remains some variability in this, and it is not always supplemented by group supervision. Senior leaders have a strong commitment to maintaining a stable, permanent workforce. This has been achieved in the majority of teams, with some having more staff hours than their full complement. At the time of this visit, just one agency member of staff was in post across children's social work teams. Where there have been personnel changes, this has been for positive reasons, for example internal promotion. Although, overall, far fewer children experience changes of social worker compared to other local authorities, a small number of children have been negatively affected by the number of changes of social worker. On occasion, the plan to support families when a social worker is absent has not been robust enough.
- Senior leaders and managers know their services well through frequent and generally effective use of live performance management information. This has enabled them to implement coherent plans to secure improvements.
- There is a desire to learn and improve across children's services. This is seen in leaders' and managers' firm commitment to learning from the peer challenge visit that took place in January 2020 and the range of audit work that is undertaken, which comprises regular case audit, themed and multi-agency audits. The full impact of case auditing is reduced because it is not always evident in case records that actions from audits have been implemented. Staff who have had recent input from the audit lead practitioner valued the learning, saying that this gave them insight into the important role auditing plays in improving practice.



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

Yours sincerely

Maire Atherton  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**