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7 September 2021

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Dear Steve

Focused visit to Isle of Wight 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 Isle of Wight children's services on 28 and 29 July 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Amanda Maxwell and Nick Stacey.

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

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. 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. This visit was carried out fully by remote means. The inspectors used video calls for discussions with local authority staff, managers and leaders.

Headline findings

The senior leadership team has continued at pace with their transformation project since the previous inspection in November 2018, when they were judged to be good. During the pandemic, they have implemented a new social work model and approach, which has had a positive impact on social work practice. The new approach is evident in children's records and other documents which are written directly to the child and family. Senior leaders acknowledge that further development and embedding of the approach across all areas of practice would strengthen the impact of this model on improving children's circumstances.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The quality of assessments, to ensure better consideration of parental histories and previous agency involvement.

Main findings

There has been a relatively low rate of COVID-19 infection on the Isle of Wight. The partnership planned and delivered a well-coordinated and effective response throughout the pandemic. Their actions have been swift and well considered, with an appropriate focus on supporting the most vulnerable. Although referral rates have recently increased, the local authority has continued to prioritise and respond swiftly to concerns about children.

Disabled children are supported by experienced, skilled and dedicated social workers who know them well. Children and their families are seen regularly, which ensures their current circumstances are known and responded to appropriately. Children develop good relationships with workers they know and trust. Children who have impaired communication are fully involved and engaged in their assessments and plans. Practitioners are creative in how they gain an understanding of a child's lived experiences and views.

Frequent visits to children enable social workers to gain insight and understanding into their lived experiences, although evidence of planned direct work is sparse. This means some work with children can lack depth and their views, wishes and experiences are not always fully explored and understood. Some children and families benefit from dedicated, purposeful, planned direct work with unqualified workers who are supervised, and their work overseen, by social workers.

Assessments routinely fully explore the presenting concerns but are often too descriptive. Parental histories and previous interventions are often only superficially referenced. Stronger assessments are evaluative and are updated at least annually. They largely avoid professional language and are written directly to the child and their parents. This ensures assessments clearly detail families' strengths and weaknesses, assisting parents to understand professionals' concerns.

When safeguarding concerns about children arise, multi-agency partners are fully involved and consulted. Child protection enquiries are detailed, with thorough exploration of family histories and circumstances. There is good consideration of safeguarding measures and contingency planning. Social workers speak with children sensitively and there is good consideration of children's needs and abilities. Management decisions are timely and proportionate, and thresholds are applied appropriately. Records of decisions, the rationale for them and next steps are clearly recorded. When concerns increase or progress is not made, social workers act

quickly to provide appropriate interventions to address risk and meet children's needs.

Children's plans are well-constructed documents which demonstrate effective and responsive planning. They are regularly reviewed and updated, with good involvement from agency professionals which supports rapid and substantial improvements in children's circumstances. In the main, plans are generally clear with detailed goals, although in weaker plans timescales are not specific and, as a result, measuring progress is hindered.

Most child in need review meetings and core groups are held regularly and are well attended. They promote purposeful progression of work. Plans are thorough and regularly reviewed, which allows professionals to analyse and evaluate children's changing circumstances. However, some records of reviews are not consistently evident in case records.

The resilience around families team (RAFT) works alongside children and their families to provide multi-disciplinary intervention and support. The targeted support is effective and valued by families. Families with serious and long-standing difficulties are enabled to recognise, explore and address the adverse impact of their parenting and behaviours on their children.

Social workers are particularly skilled in working with parents who have experienced domestic abuse. They work effectively with specialist agencies, helping parents make important decisions in the best interests of their children. They enable parents to explore their own histories and childhood experiences and how this might affect their parenting.

The majority of supervision is regular and effective and includes good reflective case discussion and exploration of further interventions, actions and support. However, in some cases there is less evidence of curious questioning and contingency planning if children's circumstances do not improve. In the RAFT team, the standard of case supervision is very high, and this supports workers to manage the emotional demands of the work.

Social workers benefit from being well supported by available and accessible managers. Managers regularly review and monitor workloads, ensuring they maintain oversight of pressures and demands. A culture of learning and development is evident throughout and in all aspects of casework and performance management. This enables staff to feel well supported and safe in their practice. The valued personal assistants complete many administrative tasks, allowing social workers more time to do social work.

Social workers' and practitioners' use of the chosen social work model is evolving and requires further embedding and development to see its impact and consistency in application throughout all areas of practice and intervention.

The current case management system is cumbersome and confusing for social workers, who have difficulty in readily locating key documents and records. There is a potential risk that children may not understand their histories. Senior leaders have identified this and have plans to transfer to a new records system in the near future.

Senior leaders and managers have an accurate view of the quality of practice, informed by a comprehensive performance management information and quality assurance framework. This supports staff and leaders to have a clear understanding of the quality of practice and improvements required. The audit process provides a 'window into practice' and opportunities to explore the quality of social work intervention while also considering learning and development needs.

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

Your sincerely

Amanda Maxwell
Her Majesty's Inspector