

30 September 2016

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Dear Julie

Monitoring visit of Surrey local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Surrey local authority children's services on 31 August and 1 September 2016. The visit was the fifth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in June 2015. The inspectors were Linda Steele HMI and Natalie Trentham HMI.

The local authority is beginning to make progress, from a low starting point, to improve services for children. Overall, inspectors found that, historically, the pace of change has been too slow, with insufficient progress made against some priority and immediate actions from the last inspection. However, the past four months have seen the progress gaining momentum although improvement is recent and is not yet found in all work with children.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the area of help and protection, with a particular focus on four themes:

- the quality of management decision making in the referral, assessment and intervention service (RAIS), and the application of thresholds for statutory intervention
- safeguarding arrangements in RAIS
- assessment and planning processes for children in need of help and protection
- management oversight and supervision.

A range of evidence was considered during the visit, including electronic case records, supervision files and notes, observations of social workers undertaking referral and assessment duties, and other information provided by staff and managers. In addition, we spoke to a range of staff, including managers, social workers, other practitioners and administrative staff.

Summary of findings

- The quality and standard of social work practice and the culture of performance management have notably improved in the west of the county, but significant weaknesses remain in the east, where practice is not yet good enough.
- Senior managers have increased their contact with frontline staff. This has led to a more responsive approach, with managers tackling problems as they arise.
- The local authority is now discharging its statutory duty to children in need, with all statutory assessments completed by social workers.
- Assistant team managers are still allocated children's cases, which is unsatisfactory.
- A number of children in the assessment and intervention hubs are without an allocated social worker, and some wait too long for an assessment of their needs.
- A restructure of the RAIS and the introduction of the 'Safer Surrey' approach of managing risk have enhanced the quality of work.
- Caseloads of some individual social workers in the RAIS remain high, particularly in the eastern area. A small number of social workers have caseloads of over 30 children.
- Not all partners understand or properly apply thresholds for making referrals for a statutory social work service.
- Strategy discussions reach the correct decision, but do not include all relevant agencies. By contrast, strategy meetings have appropriate agency attendance.
- The timeliness of initial child protection conferences has declined from 80% in June 2016 to 53% in July 2016.
- The quality and timeliness of assessments vary greatly, with some taking many months.
- There has been notable improvement in the quality of audits, following the introduction of a simplified and more child-focused audit tool.
- Staff morale is generally positive, and the new senior management team is now well regarded by staff.

Evaluation of progress

Based on the evidence gathered during the visit, we identified areas where improvement is occurring and other areas where we considered that the progress made has not met expectations.

The current senior leadership team has been effective in achieving improvements in some parts of the service, most notably in the west of the county, where social work practice is of better quality than that found during the last inspection. However, the

pace of improvement in the east of the county continues to be too slow, with practice weaknesses, ineffective management oversight, and drift and delay featuring in too many cases.

At the time of this monitoring visit, assistant team managers had, been allocated, 99 children's cases. A further 93 children in the RAIS, who required a statutory assessment or social work service, did not have an allocated social worker. The majority of these children had been waiting for up to five days, but a small minority had been waiting for as long as 20 days without purposeful statutory involvement to assess and meet their needs. Senior managers took immediate action to review each case and identified that some of these children's cases were mistakenly open due to recording errors.

Although referrals from partners are timely, a high proportion either do not meet the threshold for statutory intervention or are insufficiently detailed for social workers to make a decision on. This creates unnecessary work and pressures in the RAIS. Work to improve partners' understanding of thresholds for intervention and to reduce the high number of inappropriate referrals to children's social care is ongoing.

Organisational changes to the RAIS have increased social work capacity. The vast majority of cases seen in the referral hubs receive a timely response, with a clear analysis of risk that, in turn, leads to appropriate decisions. The co-location of early help coordinators is assisting in signposting children and families to early help services, where appropriate. This has resulted in increased numbers of children receiving early help services. Where necessary, referrals are stepped up to children's social care. A multi-agency safeguarding hub is due to be operational in October 2016, alongside a more coordinated and cohesive early help offer.

Social workers in the assessment and intervention hubs now consistently undertake all statutory assessments and intervention work. Family support workers no longer hold children's cases themselves, but work effectively alongside social workers and deliver direct work and parenting support to children and families. The 'Safer Surrey' approach to social work practice has established a framework to help to identify risk and protective factors. This is beginning to improve the quality of practice. However, the quality of assessment varies greatly, with particular weaknesses seen by inspectors in the eastern area. When the 'Safer Surrey' approach is used, assessments are of better quality, identify risks and include safety plans. Nevertheless, timeliness is poor, with some assessments taking many months. Targeted action is underway to manage and address the number of overdue assessments. This is having some effect, with numbers reducing from 444 in October 2015 to 107 in June 2016.

Social workers now visit children regularly, know the children who they work with well, and clearly articulate their wishes and feelings. However, case records do not always reflect the direct work undertaken with them or the voice of the child.

Planning for children is improving, although it remains variable. Some more recent plans are of better quality. Further work is required to ensure that all children have an up-to-date plan, that plans identify desired outcomes, timescales and responsibilities for actions, and that objectives are measurable.

Child protection enquiries are generally thorough and timely. The majority of strategy discussions include only the police and social care. The records of the discussions vary in quality, and include limited initial information from other agencies. The timeliness of child protection conferences is poor, with a decline in July 2016 to 53% being held within 15 working days of the strategy discussion. This means that some children are experiencing delay between risks being identified and multi-agency consideration of plans to protect them. The quality and effectiveness of core group records require further improvement to ensure that timely action is taken to prevent drift and delay.

Management direction and oversight is now evident in the vast majority of cases. However, managers are not rigorously ensuring that actions are completed. Managers do not consistently use weekly performance information as a practical tool to drive up the quality of practice and improve services. There has been notable improvement in the quality of audits. Audits completed for this monitoring visit were good, with a comprehensive audit tool and moderation process now in place. When practice shortfalls were identified, appropriate action plans had been put in place.

Staff are positive about working in Surrey, and report clear improvement in communication and support from senior managers. They welcome the 'Safer Surrey' approach and practice standards. Staff receive regular supervision, but the quality of supervision remains variable. Where the 'Safer Surrey' approach is used, supervision focuses on social work interventions and the progress that children and families are making. However, more work is required to embed the model across the county.

Senior managers are acutely aware that they must now improve the quality of the services that children receive. They have a clearer understanding of the areas that they need to focus on to improve outcomes for children.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Linda Steele

Her Majesty's Inspector