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Steve Crocker  
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Dear Steve,

### **Focused visit to Hampshire County Council children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Hampshire County Council children's services on 11 and 12 October 2018. The visit was conducted by Donna Marriott, Maire Atherton and Caroline Walsh, three of Her Majesty's Inspectors.

During this visit, inspectors evaluated the local authority's arrangements for children subject to a child protection plan, including the quality and impact of pre-proceedings intervention under the Public Law Outline (PLO).

A range of evidence was reviewed, including case discussions with social workers and managers and discussion with the Children and Family Court Advisory Services (CAFCASS). Inspectors also scrutinised case records, local authority performance and quality assurance information.

### **Overview**

Senior leaders have a clear vision for continually improving services for vulnerable children in Hampshire. The senior leadership team's ambitious plans for building capacity through service transformation are evidence based and are underpinned by considerable financial investment by political leaders.

A key part of the transformation programme is the introduction of the children's assessment and safeguarding teams (CAST). This has involved the integration of the initial assessment and the children in need teams, reducing the number of transition points for children and families. Although this has resulted in some inevitable

disruption for some children and staff, morale is good and increasing stability is evident.

Social workers are well supported through the development of mixed-skill teams, which include personal assistants, children and family support workers and social work assistants. These workers provide administrative and practical support to social workers, as well as specialist intervention skills. This enables social workers to spend more time doing purposeful direct work.

When children's needs escalate, decisive action is taken to ensure that they are safeguarded. However, the quality of some aspects of child protection intervention could be improved. Strategy discussions that are carried out by district teams in response to new incidents or escalating concerns do not always involve all the right agencies or include the rationale for decisions and the actions that are needed as part of the subsequent child protection enquiry. Written child protection plans do not always include clear and specific actions with timescales, and some core groups and reviews do not include a comprehensive enough analysis of progress or ongoing worries.

Legal strategy meetings are appropriately convened in response to increasing or continuing concerns about children's welfare. Inspectors identified these as an exemplar of good practice. They demonstrate strong oversight and decision-making regarding the threshold for pre-proceedings and in ensuring clarity about next steps. When cases enter the pre-proceedings process, most are well managed, but they are not always reviewed proactively enough to ensure that actions are carried out in good time. Consequently, for a very small minority of children, plans are not progressed at the desired pace.

The senior leadership team has an accurate view of the quality of services for children in need of protection. They had already identified, prior to the focused visit, most of the areas for development identified by inspectors. The service transformation and the implementation of the CAST model aims to strengthen practice for children in need of help and protection. The early impact of this change was evident in some children's cases reviewed by inspectors, for instance in the authoritative decision-making for children whose circumstances are not improving.

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

- The quality of strategy discussions in response to child protection concerns on children's cases that are already open to the service, in particular the recording of the rationale for decisions and the actions needed to inform next steps.
- The quality of recording of child protection plans and core group reviews to ensure that actions are clear, that timescales are identified and that progress against the plan is effectively considered.

- Consistency in ensuring that all children subject to pre-proceedings are reviewed regularly to ensure that all plans and actions progress in good time.

## **Findings**

- The implementation of the CAST model is beginning to reduce the number of transition points for children who need help and protection. Some caseloads are higher than leaders would like, but they are beginning to reduce as the workforce increases in line with the transformation plan. The investment in a mixed-skill team, with personal assistants, children and family support workers and social work assistants working alongside social workers, adds tangible capacity. It supports social workers to focus on their relationships and work with children and families. Social workers value this support highly, and morale is good.
- Social workers know children well. They visit children regularly in line with their needs. Leaders and managers have taken steps to improve the quality of recording in this area, and this has had a positive impact on practice. Records of visits provide a strong sense of children's lives and experiences and demonstrate why social workers are involved, with clear links to their plans.
- Assessments are keenly focused on risks and strengths and identify children's needs well. Most provide a good insight into children's experiences of family life: they include analysis of historical information and provide a clear understanding of family functioning. Assessments lead to sensible plans to support children. Importantly, they result in the provision of helpful services to improve children's lives. Not all assessments capture fully the impact of identity, culture and diversity on children's experiences, and further work is needed to ensure that the views of young, pre-verbal children are well represented.
- When children's needs escalate, decisive action is taken to ensure that they are safeguarded. However, the quality of the strategy discussions carried out by the district teams on children's cases that are already open to the service requires some improvement. Most include police and district social care teams only, and recording is limited. The rationale for decisions is not always clearly recorded, and there is an emphasis on the status of the investigation rather than the actions agreed and any contingency arrangements.
- Child protection enquiries are comprehensive and provide a good overview of actions taken. They evidence a strong analysis of the key issues for the child and lead to appropriate decisions regarding next steps. When children are considered to be at risk of significant harm, decisive and timely action is taken to safeguard them, including convening initial child protection conferences. Enquiries are robustly overseen by managers, who add a clear and helpful layer of analysis.
- Child protection conferences are appropriately convened when risks to children escalate. Children and families are supported to share their views, although this

is not yet at a level that managers aspire to. Work is underway to increase participation further.

- The quality of child protection plans requires some improvement. They do not always set out clear actions and timescales. Contingency plans are included, but could be more specific. They use over-professional language, making it difficult for families and involved professionals to understand what the consequences would be if progress is not achieved.
- Partnership working is a strength; partners engage readily in child protection conferences and plans.
- Reviews and core group meetings take place regularly and involve families in considering their progress against the plan. There is, however, some variability in the quality of recording of core group meetings. Although the new conference template clearly identifies where progress has been achieved, it is not always easy to see how actions are reviewed.
- Conference chairs provide oversight of plans and take action to escalate when they identify a lack of effective progress, but this has not always made a difference in improving outcomes for the child. Inspectors identified a small minority of children's plans which had not progressed at the pace needed, sometimes for prolonged periods. In more recent practice, inspectors identified authoritative action in response to continuing concerns about children.
- When concerns increase, or do not reduce, pre-proceedings under the Public Law Outline are effectively initiated. Legal strategy meetings analyse the risks to children and determine threshold decisions well. The recording of these meetings is comprehensive and leads to clear and effective planning. Letters before proceedings, although consistently sent to parents, are not always written in a straightforward or personalised way to ensure that they are understandable.
- Senior managers have taken action to strengthen their oversight of children's cases in pre-proceedings. Although this has resulted in a reduction in the number of children who remain subject to pre-proceedings for longer than six months, it is not yet effective in ensuring that all children's plans are reviewed and progressed at the pace that is needed.
- Management oversight is effective. Managers across all levels are visible and available. Supervision takes place regularly and is valued by social workers. There is more to do to ensure that recording includes the thinking behind decisions and the actions agreed.
- Senior managers ensure the effective overview of service performance through a comprehensive performance framework. A wide range of data and performance information is available to managers and leaders to help them to maintain a clear oversight of practice. A well-established quality assurance programme provides a baseline for reviewing the compliance and quality of practice. Regular auditing is

undertaken alongside social workers, providing helpful opportunities for learning. A recently introduced audit tool is facilitating a more qualitative approach to auditing. This is still embedding, and further development is needed to ensure that auditors are equipped with the necessary skills to analyse fully the practice they are reviewing.

Thank you and your staff for your positive engagement with the focused visit. Ofsted will take these findings into account when planning your next inspection or visit.

Yours sincerely

Donna Marriott  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**