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Dear Ms Ioannides

Monitoring visit of Reading children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Reading children's services on 26 and 27 June 2019. The visit was the ninth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in June 2016. The inspectors were Maire Atherton and Nicola Bennett, Her Majesty's Inspectors.

This is the second visit since responsibility for delivering children's social care and early help services in Reading transferred to Brighter Futures for Children (BFFC) in December 2018. Although there have been some improvements in the service, for example in the children and young people disability team, the progress is slow, uneven and, when made, not always sustained.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the area of help and protection, particularly the work carried out in the Family Intervention Team (FIT), the Children and Young People's Disability Team (CYPDT) and the Access and Assessment team (A&A). Inspectors focused on children who are the subject of child protection and child in need plans.

A range of evidence was considered during the visit, including electronic case records, supervision notes and the local authority's performance and quality assurance information relevant to the area of focus for this visit. Interviews were held with social workers and team managers. Inspectors also met with senior managers in BFFC.

Overview

The ongoing high turnover of social work staff at all levels of the organisation continues to impede progress in improving the quality of services for children in Reading, and has contributed to drift and delay in progressing work with many children and families. They do not always have a named social worker. This has a negative impact on how often they are seen and by whom, and does not enable the development of relationships with professionals who children and families know and trust.

Performance management data and the outcome of audits have identified the areas where improvement is essential. However, the lack of staff means that progress, when it is made, is very difficult to sustain. Senior leaders underline the commitment of BFFC to making the recruitment and retention of staff their utmost priority. However, this has yet to have significant impact on the quality of service that children receive in Reading.

At the monitoring visit in February 2018, there were a significant number of children's cases that were not allocated to social workers. In May 2019, this recurred, and leaders identified that 171 children did not have a named social worker. There are delays in visits to children and the implementation of child protection and child in need plans. Many of these plans do not cover all the areas necessary to ensure that children are properly safeguarded. The frequency and quality of management oversight is inconsistent and does not drive practice improvement. Leaders have taken some immediate steps to manage this situation by creating extra social work capacity, reviewing children's cases and not progressing children's cases from the assessment teams. This is beginning to have some positive impact for some children, but has not rectified the situation.

Findings and evaluation of progress

The high and sometimes sudden turnover of staff continues to have a serious impact on the progression of some children's cases. Senior leaders attributed the 171 children's cases being unallocated in May 2019 to the sudden departure of a number of frontline staff and the difficulty of appointing replacement staff quickly.

Some children are being visited by duty workers and so are seeing a succession of different social workers. This lack of consistency of social workers makes it harder for families to demonstrate improvement or for social workers to identify increasing risk or lack of progress. One four-year-old child met three social workers in as many visits. In another case, the newly allocated social worker was keenly aware of the number of previous workers and arranged a visit by someone the child and family knew. It remains the case that many children subject to child in need plans are not being visited on a regular basis, and visits that do take place are not recorded. For those children 'held' in the A&A team in particular, there are delays in developing and progressing plans and holding reviews, and there is a lack of urgency in some cases where circumstances for children are not improving.

Strategy discussions and subsequent reports demonstrate multi-agency involvement, effective information-sharing by those present and evaluation of risk, although the attendance and contribution to these by the police is variable. This is being followed up at a senior level.

There are some delays in convening initial child protection conferences and there are further delays in visits following the outcome of these. Independent reviewing officers continue to provide challenge, when necessary, through midway reviews between child protection conferences, for example in securing the progression to a legal planning meeting. There are similar delays in convening child in need meetings.

There are also some delays in undertaking and completing assessments due to the high staff turnover. There is substantial variability in the quality of assessments. Some are detailed and reflect the voice of the child, consider other siblings in the house and reference family history and relevant research. Weaker assessments do not effectively consider the history of neglect, previous social care involvement or parental capacity to change. In both assessments and plans, there is no consideration of children's culture, heritage and beliefs.

Plans do not consistently reflect all the issues that impact on the care of children identified in the assessment or the recommendations of the assessment. It remains the case that not all outline plans are sufficiently specific or targeted. There are some instances where plans are not achieving change and the turnover of social workers means that this is not recognised. In the CYPDT, plans are stronger, parents are appropriately supported to change their parenting style and actions are child-focused.

Despite the introduction of rigorous tracking arrangements noted in the March 2018 monitoring visit, inspectors saw significant delays for a small number of children in the completion of pre-proceedings work. Practitioners do not understand the processes and timescales for moving out of pre-proceedings work, either stepping down or issuing care proceedings. This builds in delays in decision-making and compounds uncertainty for children and families.

There has been some improvement in the frequency of child protection conference reviews and core groups. Where there are consistent and experienced social workers with manageable caseloads, there is good multi-agency discussion of risks and needs. BFFC's chosen model of social work practice is used effectively.

Social workers who have had time to get to know the children describe them well and convey a clear sense of the child. A small sample of direct work seen was creative and effectively captured children's voices. Younger children benefited from play that enabled them to show and tell of their lived experiences.

The frequency and quality of supervision is variable. While there is management oversight, the difference that this is making is not evident in progressing cases. This

has been recognised and, since the last monitoring visit in March 2019, the management structure of the family intervention teams has been strengthened with the creation of an assistant team manager (ATM) post in each FIT. The recent appointments of practice improvement managers (PIM) were also intended to develop social work practice across the service. However, ATMs and PIMs are currently holding cases, either to continue work already started with families, or they are newly allocated, so the benefits of these new posts are yet to be seen.

Through the audit process, leaders and managers have identified the areas that need to improve. However, in most cases it is difficult to see how this knowledge is driving and securing improvement for children and families.

In common with previous monitoring visits, this visit has highlighted a recurring pattern of staff being recruited and then leaving relatively quickly. At the time of this visit, one of the two permanent members of the senior leadership team, the deputy director, who has been in post since November 2018, had resigned. Despite the immediate appointment of an interim deputy director and the six new temporary staff due to take up posts the week after this visit, staff morale is fragile. Their confidence that the small improvements made will be sustained and further improvements made is low. The interim director of children services recognises that the recruitment and retention of staff are fundamental to achieve change. BFFC has demonstrated their commitment to achieve this by investment in new recruitment resources.

Thank you and your staff for your positive engagement with this monitoring visit. I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Maire Atherton
Her Majesty's Inspector