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Dear Mr Haley

Focused visit to Swindon children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Swindon children's services on 8 December 2020. The inspectors were Peter McEntee, Andrew Waugh, Caroline Walsh, Joy Howick and Michele Costello, all of whom are Her Majesty's Inspectors.

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.

The methodology for this visit was 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. This visit was carried out fully by remote means. Inspectors used video calls for discussions with local authority social workers, managers and leaders. 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 and meeting the needs of the local authority's workforce.

This visit looked at the quality and impact of key decision-making across help and protection, children in care and care leavers' services, together with the impact of leadership on service development.

Overview

The local authority has maintained the effectiveness of its front door services, despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, the introduction of a new

electronic casework system and a rise in referrals over the recent weeks. Decision-making is timely and appropriate actions are taken to protect vulnerable children. Management oversight and the rationale for decision-making is well recorded. Thresholds for statutory action are appropriately applied, with managers and social workers demonstrating a clear understanding of risk.

Effective leadership has ensured that the needs of children and families have been carefully considered and responded to during the COVID-19 pandemic. Vulnerable children have been identified, and schools and the local authority have worked closely together to encourage attendance.

There has been a continued focus on the safety of children and management of risk to children. Plans for children, whether at home or in the care of the local authority, have continued to be progressed. The needs of care leavers have been carefully considered and the local authority has ensured that these young people have had access to extra help during the COVID-19 period.

Levels of contact between children, their families, carers and social workers have been carefully considered, and face-to-face contact has only been reduced when the local authority considered that the impact of this on children would be limited. Social workers and other staff have continued to visit families in their homes, and when necessary intervened to improve the lives of children.

The virtual school has ensured that children in care have received extra help, with many getting additional tuition in English and mathematics. A small number of children in care with an education, health and care plan (EHCP) have not been allocated a school place quickly enough when they are placed outside Swindon. When children miss education for long periods the authority is not updating information on these children frequently enough.

Social work practice has continued to improve through an embedded quality assurance process well led by the director of children's services.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The timeliness of provision of a school place for children with an EHCP.
- The frequency of reviews of children who are missing education.

Findings

- The council's response to the pandemic has been comprehensive and timely. It has ensured that services to children and families have continued to be effective. Risk assessments are completed taking into account the needs of children and carers as well as staff.
- Led effectively by the director of children's services, there has continued to be a focus on ensuring quality of practice. Quality assurance processes are in place and senior managers have ensured that audits of work and thematic auditing have

continued during the pandemic. Effective learning from these processes contributes to continuing improvements in social work practice. Much work has been undertaken to increase the stability of the staff group since the last full inspection and there has been a continued reduction in reliance on agency staff.

- Partnerships with other agencies have been maintained and enhanced both at a strategic level, through effective joint working across the partnership group in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and on the ground, with good attendance at child protection conferences and planning meetings for children.
- Early help processes enable many children to get help at an early opportunity. If risk escalates, children's cases are escalated to statutory services in a timely way.
- Child protection strategy meetings in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) are timely, with appropriate attendance from partners. There is effective information sharing and clear written minutes and action points for social workers to follow.
- Child protection thresholds and decisions are appropriate and informed by identification of risk, including an understanding of neglect. Child protection enquiries appropriately assess risks and engage views of professionals and families.
- Child protection conferences are timely and plans clearly identify risks and vulnerabilities for children. Actions arising from plans are focused on enhancing safety planning. As a result, plans show a positive impact on reducing risk. There is an appreciation of cumulative harm and a strong understanding of neglect for older children as well as younger children. Core groups and review meetings are held virtually but are timely and benefit from good engagement of professionals, which supports children's circumstances to improve.
- Children with children in need (CIN) plans are well supported and where risks escalate there is appropriate consideration of what further steps, including child protection processes, are required. In some cases, however, successive lockdowns have further hampered effective engagement with families, delaying progress.
- There is an appropriate focus on children's health needs, including mental health and emotional well-being. A range of support services, including Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), have continued to provide support to children during the pandemic. When services were unable to provide a full service, the local authority sought and obtained alternative providers.
- Identification of vulnerability to criminal and sexual exploitation is inconsistent across teams and results in a varying case management approach. For some children, this means they are not always referred to the criminal exploitation and child sexual exploitation team (Opal team) and consequently do not benefit from direct interventions by this team. Senior managers are aware of this as a potential gap, and the fact that this team does not currently cover care leavers. A multi-agency risk panel (MARF) meets monthly and has strategic and operational responsibility for responding to exploitation risk. There is a comprehensive return home from missing form and a high take-up of interviews and detailed

information gathered has resulted in low repeat missing-from-home episodes and reducing missing-from-home episodes overall.

- The risks to children at the edge of care are considered effectively through a public law outline (PLO) process, which ensures that appropriate assessments are commissioned to inform the authority, and if necessary the courts, on parenting abilities and best options for children. Decisions to step down or initiate proceedings are made in line with evidence of progress or increased risk. Letters to parents explaining the concerns the local authority have are clearly set out, identifying what support has been offered and what actions are needed to avoid court action. However, there is some unhelpful use of abbreviations that are potentially confusing or may be difficult for a parent to understand.
- During lockdown periods, and despite pressures caused by the pandemic, the local authority has continued to safeguard children effectively by removing them from harmful situations, through either voluntary agreements or through applications to court. This includes careful consideration of the needs of unborn children.
- In the majority of cases, children are appropriately matched to carers, and when possible move to live with other members of their family. In most cases brothers and sisters are kept together.
- Children in care benefit from social workers who know their children well and have developed positive relationships with them. Social work staff often have a good understanding of children's needs. However, some children have experienced too many allocated social workers in a relatively short time and this has impacted negatively on their ability and willingness to develop new relationships with them.
- Children's care plans are child-focused and offer support to reduce risk. They take account of the child's wishes and feelings, and where appropriate the child's wishes are incorporated into the plan. Children's voices are well recorded in their plans.
- Independent reviewing officers are making a difference. They carefully consider complex decisions for vulnerable children. Plan progression, and issue resolution, that takes place outside children's reviews are recorded well and considered in future planning.
- During lockdown, and during the pandemic generally, children have continued to have family time with significant family members. At the start of lockdown, family time was facilitated through virtual platforms or telephone calls, changing to risk-assessed face-to-face time when permitted. For children in long-term placements the frequency of family time is appropriate to meet their needs.
- Permanency decision-making, and progress towards permanency, has not been adversely affected by the pandemic, with inspectors seeing little drift or delay in progressing children's plans. Plans are focused on the child's timescales; parallel planning is considered at an early stage, including foster-to-adopt placements and identification of alternative family carers.

- Decisions made for children in care to return to their parents under a care order are mostly informed by parenting assessments and are reviewed by appropriate senior managers and placed on the child's record.
- There is an active children in care council. Children attending the council said they have been well supported to discuss many issues, including the need for advocacy, and had been able to contribute to interviews for staff.
- There has been a continued reduction in the numbers of young people in care placed outside Swindon. New commissioning roles have been created and staff appointed in the last 12 months to improve many aspects of provision, from recruitment of foster carers to developing the local market of children's homes within Swindon. The use of foster carers to offer 'staying put' placements for care leavers has been promoted by ensuring that foster carers are not financially disadvantaged.
- Care leavers benefit from up-to-date detailed pathway plans. Young people contribute to their plans and their views are evident within them. Young people continue to be supported at 21 and beyond. Partners, including the probation service, Department of Work and Pensions, and housing and supported housing schemes, work together well to support young people. There was no evidence that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the availability of most support services to care leavers. Regular contact has been maintained with young people, albeit largely through electronic means, although more recently face-to-face contact has resumed.
- Care leavers felt supported both practically and emotionally throughout the COVID-19 period and spoke positively about many aspects of the service they receive. They described it as responsive to their individual needs and providing them with a high level of personalised support. It is noteworthy that at the height of the lockdown, and subsequently, that the local authority has ensured care leavers received food parcels, a gift voucher and continuing offers of food.
- The virtual school has ensured that it has had clear oversight of attendance at school of vulnerable children, including children in care, during the pandemic. Where children in care were staying at home during the initial lockdown their circumstances were reviewed by the virtual school together with their social worker. However, a small number of children were kept at home by foster carers due to COVID-19 fears. Additional tuition in English and mathematics has been made available to children in care and currently almost half have taken this up.
- For a small number of children in care with an EHCP who are placed out of borough it has taken too long to secure a school place. While the virtual school has escalated its concerns about these children, this intervention has not been effective quickly enough.
- The number of children electively home educated (EHE) has increased significantly over the course of the pandemic and is approximately 60% higher than a year ago. While the local authority has increased staffing to ensure these

parents and children have been contacted and offered a meeting within three weeks, capacity to meet rising numbers has been stretched.

- Numbers of children missing from education have reduced, but reviews of children who have been missing from education and could not be quickly located are only reviewed at six-monthly intervals. This does not ensure that the local authority has sufficiently up-to-date information on these children.

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

Yours sincerely

Peter McEntee
Her Majesty's Inspector