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Dear Rachael,

Focused visit to Surrey County Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Surrey County Council children's services on 24 and 25 March 2021. Her Majesty's inspectors were Matt Reed, Tracey Scott, Nick Stacey, Maire Atherton and Stephen Bentham.

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 staff, children, managers and leaders within the local authority. 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.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- Management oversight and case planning in the children with disability service
- The analysis of risk and planning for children experiencing long-term neglect
- Case records of how placements are matched with children's needs.

Findings

- Since the last inspection, in 2018, Surrey children's services have been on a significant improvement journey. The council, along with its partner agencies, acknowledges that improving outcomes for vulnerable children had, prior to the last inspection, not been prioritised, but is now committed to driving forward the changes required. A new model of working, alongside a revised thresholds document, was launched in 2019 with the aim of supporting families early and preventing children's needs from escalating. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought additional challenges in progressing the improvement programme, and the sudden death in June 2020 of the director of children's services, who was instrumental in leading on necessary improvements, is still felt by many across the council. A stable senior leadership team and the recently appointed director of children's services have ensured that progress has continued.
- Senior leaders have responded swiftly to the challenges of COVID-19. Multi-agency forums and links with community groups were created and strengthened to ensure that the needs of children and their families were identified and responded to. Effective partnerships with education and health colleagues have ensured that vulnerable children have been seen and their safety ascertained early in the pandemic. In response to emerging needs, additional staff have been redeployed to the children's single point of access (C-SPA) and the emergency duty team. Youth workers, social workers, family group conference practitioners and staff from child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) now provide out-of-hours interventions to families in crisis.
- As part of the restructure of children's services, the C-SPA has been created, which is contributing to effective multi-agency information-sharing and application of thresholds. Comprehensive checks are completed by social workers, and there is good consideration of family history to inform decision-making. Parental consent is well understood. Management oversight and decision-making are clearly recorded, providing a rationale for the next steps. It is positive that, despite an increase in demand, timeliness of decision-making has been maintained. However, further work is required to ensure that all referrals that require social care intervention are dealt with in a timely way.
- Child protection enquiries are completed within agreed timescales, and strategy meetings are well attended by agency professionals. Records of these meetings demonstrate proportionate decision-making that reflects individual children's circumstances. Appropriate timely action is taken to ensure that children are safeguarded. Subsequent assessments of risk are predominantly well written, and in the majority of cases management decision-making and oversight are clearly recorded.
- Social workers have continued to visit children regularly throughout the pandemic, face to face or virtually, according to their level of risk or need. Social workers seek and gain the views of children, and these are used to inform decision-making and care planning. However, records of visits do not always evidence whether children have been seen alone.

- Decisions to step children's cases down from social care to early help services are appropriate. When needs escalate, referrals to children's social care from early help services are timely, and this has ensured that families receive the right level of support.
- More recent improvements in the quality of social work practice and multi-agency working are leading to positive experiences for children who are subject to child in need and child protection plans. However, this is not consistent. For some children, over-optimism by professionals regarding parental capacity to change or sustain improvements has resulted in multiple interventions, and they have continued to live in circumstances of neglect for too long.
- In the children with disability service, social workers do not always demonstrate a thorough understanding of safeguarding issues. Children in need in this part of the service do not benefit from consistently timely visits, and their plans are not always reviewed regularly to ensure that they are progressing. As a result, too many children experience drift and delay in their circumstances improving.
- Across teams, supervision takes place on a regular basis. Most supervision records are reflective and capture children's experiences. However, management oversight is not always effective in identifying drift or progressing plans to ensure that children's circumstances improve within reasonable timescales.
- There are strong systems in place to ensure effective oversight and coordination of services for children who go missing or who are at risk of exploitation. Effective multi-agency information-sharing and mapping of concerns contribute to improving safety planning and reduction of risk.
- Senior leaders have introduced a new model of working, embracing a multi-disciplinary approach to provide effective family interventions, so that children can remain at home whenever possible and it is safe for them to do so. Families have access to specialist practitioners to help parents address issues (such as mental health, substance misuse and domestic abuse) that are impairing their parenting and to provide intensive family support. This has continued to develop throughout the pandemic, and there are early indicators that this approach is effective at keeping some families together.
- When safeguarding concerns increase, the pre-proceedings work undertaken with families to avoid going to court is timely and appropriate. Legal gateway meeting records and letters to parents are detailed and set out clearly local authority concerns. When children are subject to pre-proceedings, family group conferencing and family network meetings are routinely considered to prevent children from entering care if possible.
- Despite efforts to avoid the need to have to take children into care to secure their safety, this is not always successful, and some children enter care in an emergency rather than in a planned way.
- Children and young people spoken to reflected on their experiences of being in care. Some of the children described being well supported by social workers, carers and personal advisers, feeling secure and making progress in school.

However, other children spoke about their experiences of multiple placement moves, changes of social worker and a lack of support to ensure that all their needs, both physical and emotional, are met in a timely way.

- In Surrey, there is a clear focus on meeting the emotional needs of children in care and care leavers. There is early access to a range of emotional well-being services as well as a dedicated CAMHS team for children in care. The local authority has supported children to remain in contact with their families effectively during the pandemic. Social workers mainly continue to visit children in person, alongside the use of virtual contact. Personal advisers demonstrate a real commitment to keeping in touch with care leavers through telephone calls and visits. Care leavers have been well supported by professional networks. Foster carers spoken to are positive about the support they received from the local authority during the pandemic.
- The virtual school provides effective support to enable children in care to attend school. The attendance of children in care and those with a social worker has been good. During the pandemic, additional funds have been used by the virtual school to provide devices to enable children in care to access education remotely. Personal education plans for children aged 16 and above are clearly focused to ensure that children can access appropriate learning or employment.
- Local authority and school leaders work together effectively to oversee and monitor children who are missing education. The low number of children missing education is testament to the tenacity of leaders in ensuring that children continue to access education. There has been a significant rise in the number of children who are electively home educated. Leaders have ensured that visits by inclusion officers are undertaken for vulnerable children to maintain oversight of their welfare, and additional support has been provided to families where this has been needed. The particular vulnerabilities of certain groups of children, such as the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community, have been identified and additional resources provided by the local authority to enable them to continue to access education remotely when unable to attend school in the pandemic.
- Most children are in appropriate placements that meet their needs. However, sufficiency of placements remains a challenge, and this has meant that some children have experienced placement moves. This has been exacerbated by COVID-19, which has had an impact on current and potential new placement availability. Matching considerations are not always evident in children's records to evidence how their needs will be met within their placement.
- The local authority makes extensive use of unregulated placements, such as semi-independent accommodation for young people in care aged over 16. There are varying levels of support to these young people, which are not always clearly matched to their individual needs. Although management oversight is evident, efforts that have been made to find alternative placements that better suit the needs of young people are not always clear in their records and care plan.
- Senior leaders have good oversight of and grip on the quality of social work practice. Extensive auditing and detailed performance information have enabled

leaders to identify patterns, including service strengths as well as areas for improvement, and this continues to shape improvement plans.

- Leaders have been quick to respond to the increase in demand for services. In recognition of the increase in referrals and assessments, additional staff have been employed, and for most workers caseloads have remained manageable. Staff turnover is reducing, and a new recruitment and retention package has increased the number of permanent staff.
- Social workers reported feeling well supported during the pandemic. They have had access to managers for decisions and regular 'check-ins' to monitor their welfare. Staff have access to online learning and webinars to promote their development. They are supported to maintain face-to-face visits, risk assessments are updated to support their safety and they have had access to personal protective equipment.

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

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

Yours sincerely

Matt Reed
Her Majesty's Inspector