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Melissa Caslake  
Chief Officer for Children's Services  
Devon County Council  
County Hall, Topsham Road  
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Dear Ms Caslake

### **Focused visit to Devon children's services**

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.

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Devon children's services on 26 and 27 May 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors were Tonwen Empson, Joy Howick, Nigel Parkes, Neil Penswick and John Roughton.

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 remotely. Inspectors used video calls for discussions with local authority staff, managers and leaders, children and young people, foster carers, school leaders and partner agencies. The lead inspector and the chief officer for 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**

- Making sure that decisions taken by the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) are acted on.
- Professional curiosity and the quality of assessments.
- How effectively plans drive progress for children.

- The quality of recorded management oversight and critical challenge.

## Findings

- COVID-19 infection rates in Devon have been relatively low. Nonetheless, the challenges associated with successive national lockdowns have been enormous. With 371 schools spread across a vast geographical area, it has not been easy to keep children, particularly the most vulnerable, in sight and safe. Demand for early help has risen sharply. The complexity and volume of referrals that the local authority is receiving have increased significantly. The local authority and its partners have risen to the challenge, delivering a well-coordinated and effective response. School attendance figures for children who have a social worker, and those with an education, health and care plan, have been consistently above national averages.
- On 26 March 2020, when the first national lockdown was announced, the local authority was still adjusting to the impact and implications of the serious weaknesses identified by the previous inspection. During the intervening period, senior leaders have successfully carried out a number of, what the chair of the Improvement Partnership described as, 'under the bonnet repairs'. But nothing is completely fixed. In reality, the local authority is still at the start of its improvement journey. The new permanent chief officer for children's services only came into post at the start of February 2021. The local authority's adoption of restorative practice is nowhere near complete. Recruitment and retention are still extremely problematic. The help and protection, care and support that many children receive are still poor.
- Effective management oversight in the MASH helps to ensure that, for the most part, thresholds are applied appropriately. Prompt action is taken to protect children who are considered to be at immediate risk of significant harm. In less urgent cases, however, decision-making sometimes takes longer than is necessary. A loophole which allows social workers in the MASH to divert enquiries to early help without management approval or authorisation is also a potential risk. Senior leaders are taking appropriate action to ensure that all children get the help and support they need quickly.
- Most strategy meetings are held in a timely manner and are well attended. The decision to initiate a child protection enquiry is clearly recorded, as are the next steps. However, a 20% increase in the number of child protection enquiries, allied to the fact that, once completed, over half of them do not lead to an initial child protection conference, indicates that some families are being subjected to child protection procedures unnecessarily.
- Senior leaders have taken immediate action to address inspectors' concerns about the interface between the MASH and the four locality-based initial response teams (IRTs). Too many initial assessments lack professional curiosity, resulting in cases being closed too quickly, without issues and concerns having been fully explored. On occasions, decisions made by the MASH are unilaterally overturned

by the IRTs without consultation or discussion. Partly a product of increased workload pressures and resource shortfalls, this means that children are not always getting the right level of help and protection at the first time of asking, which is undoubtedly contributing to the comparatively high re-referral rate.

- During the pandemic, social workers have continued to maintain regular contact with children who are the subject of child in need (CIN) or child protection plans. However, while needs and risks are clearly identified, practice is too variable. Many plans lack focus and direction. Others are adult- rather than child-focused. As a result, social work visits are not always purposeful and CIN review and core group meetings are not consistently driving change and monitoring progress effectively.
- When children's needs, or the risks to which they are exposed, increase, cases are stepped up appropriately from early help to children's social care. However, a tendency on the part of some social workers and their managers to mistake small or short-term improvements for sustainable long-term change sometimes leads to child protection plans ending prematurely. While cases are being stepped down appropriately to early help, a lack of awareness of the early help offer on the part of some social workers means that children and families are not always able to benefit from it.
- Arrangements for responding to children who go missing from home or care and/or are exposed to exploitation are well developed. The prompt offer and completion of return home interviews have helped to reduce missing episodes. Safer Me risk assessments are used purposefully to identify and articulate risks, although the resulting action plans are not always as clear, specific or measurable as they need to be. This has the potential to blunt the effectiveness of any multi-agency protective response.
- For parents who have chosen to begin, or to continue, to electively home educate their children during the pandemic, the local authority has maintained effective systems to monitor provision and to ensure that children are safe.
- Better use is being made of pre-proceedings and the Public Law Outline to ensure that, when children's cases come to court, they are court-ready. Relationships with the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service and the judiciary are much improved.
- Rather than simply being seen as a stepping stone into care, pre-proceedings are also being used effectively to promote meaningful change with families. There is, however, still more work to do. Letters before proceedings, and agreements and plans of expectations, are not always clear or easy to understand. On occasions, children are stepped down from pre-proceedings too soon.
- Timely intervention means that most children now come into care in a planned way. However, while most children are living with foster carers, placement stability is a challenge. An increased focus on permanency is not yet fully embedded. Placements for children whose behaviours and needs are complex are also in short supply.

- The quality of support that children in care receive is also too variable. While children are seen regularly and reviews are timely, plans are not always progressed with the vigour and sense of urgency required. On occasions, this is leading to drift and delay. As a result, some children are exposed unnecessarily to continuing uncertainty about their current and future situations.
- The vast majority of children and young people have up-to-date annual health assessments. However, those with additional needs relating to their mental health and emotional well-being do not always get the help they need in a timely way.
- Rather than simply prioritising the attendance of children in care, the virtual school has maintained a focus on ensuring that children are supported and challenged to make good progress in their learning. School leaders are positive about the communication and support received, not least in helping them to avoid having to 'reinvent the wheel' because of COVID-19.
- Children in care have been encouraged and supported to enjoy family time, using whatever arrangements are safe and appropriate. Arrangements for managing supervised contact have been streamlined, helping to reduce delays in children and families being able to see each other.
- During the pandemic, personal advisers have been tenacious in trying to maintain meaningful contact with care leavers, particularly the most vulnerable. While there is undoubtedly room for further improvement, care-experienced young people are starting to benefit from an improved strategic focus. Most care leavers are living in suitable accommodation. Efforts to promote their take-up of education, employment and training have been intensified.
- Improved performance management information and increased audit activity mean that senior leaders are more clearly sighted on frontline practice. However, the local authority's self-evaluation erred on the side of optimism. The MASH got very little mention and there was no reference to the differences in practice and performance between teams, services and districts which contribute to the general lack of consistency in the quality of the help and protection, care and support that children receive.
- The local authority has developed a number of easy-to-use performance dashboards, making it possible to interrogate performance and monitor compliance in real time. But while the challenge board, which meets regularly once a month, identifies emerging trends and patterns and asks many of the right questions, it is not clear how effectively that information is being used to improve the experience and progress of children.
- Quality assurance is a work in progress. While a lot of audit activity is being undertaken, it does not always lead to real and tangible improvements for children. Until very recently, audit action plans were not sufficiently specific or measurable. As a result, there was no guarantee that, once a case had been evaluated, remedial action would be taken to prevent further drift and delay for children.

- There is no reason to doubt the county council's support for children's social care services, but the quality and effectiveness of scrutiny and critical challenge provided by elected members and the corporate centre are not yet fully developed.
- During the pandemic, most social workers have felt well supported. Most now get regular supervision. Access to online training has been maintained. However, managers are not consistently providing the right level of critical challenge. It is often difficult to identify how, when and why key management decisions are made.
- Workforce stability is still a major problem, reflecting the fact that, for many years, the local authority failed to recognise the significance and importance in a highly competitive social care market of having a coherent and effective recruitment and retention strategy. In the local authority's own words, 'High vacancy rates and use of agency workers, and staff turnover, is affecting our ability to develop meaningful and sustained relationships with families.'
- Statutory partners are enthusiastic about the potential for Devon's safeguarding children partnership arrangements to make a real difference. Focusing on those issues that have mattered most during the pandemic has given them an opportunity to work together at speed while developing the confidence and ability to have challenging conversations as part of a shared commitment to develop joint solutions. As the outgoing lead member for children's services observed, 'During the pandemic, the walls have come down... we must not allow them to go back up again.'

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

Yours sincerely

Nigel Parkes  
Her Majesty's Inspector