

12 October 2021

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County Hall
West Street
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Dear Ms Butler

Monitoring visit to West Sussex children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to West Sussex children's services on 7 September 2021. This was the third monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in May 2019. Her Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Tracey Scott and Maire Atherton.

Areas covered by the visit

During this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made for children in the following areas:

- The quality, effectiveness and impact of social work practice in improving outcomes for disabled children.
- The quality, timeliness and impact of supervision, management oversight and decision-making, social work capacity and caseloads.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

Headline findings

The local authority is making steady progress. The support that disabled children receive has improved since the October 2020 focused assurance visit, when significant concerns were highlighted for disabled children in West Sussex. Systems, policies and processes have been reviewed and developed to provide greater clarity of practice expectations, and management oversight of children within the children with disability teams has been strengthened. While the quality and effectiveness of assessments, plans and supervision is improving, it remains too variable. The impact of social work support that children receive is inconsistent, and for a small number of children this continues to be ineffective.

Feedback to inspectors from a parent captures the improvements for some children well. When asked about the service they received, the parent responded, 'She [the social worker] made such a difference... before her, workers came and went and never followed up, it felt like they weren't interested... first person to listen.' A young person told inspectors, 'Whatever I say, she listens.'

Findings and evaluation of progress

A stable senior leadership team is resolute in its approach to achieving sustainable improvements for the children of West Sussex. It has maintained a clear focus on improving the experiences of disabled children since the October 2020 Ofsted visit and has worked purposefully to deliver improvements within the service. Activity has taken place to ensure that all disabled children have an up-to-date assessment of their current needs and circumstances. A child in need policy for disabled children and a care leavers' joint protocol have been developed, and the eligibility criteria have been revised and co-produced with parents. Systems and processes have been put in place to strengthen performance information and management oversight. Corporate and political support and commitment has been continued. There has been significant financial investment in the development of specialist in-house residential provision and short breaks for disabled children.

Most disabled children and their families receive an effective service from the Integrated Front Door team when children are first referred. Management oversight of initial contacts is swift. A specialist child with disability worker brings added value to inform effective information gathering, decision-making and next steps for children at the point of referral. Thresholds for disabled children are understood and appropriately applied. A small number of brothers and sisters of disabled children do not benefit from a timely assessment of their needs and consequently wait too long to receive the support they need. Staff sickness in the service has meant that some children experience a delay in decision-making and subsequent next steps, for example initial visits taking place.

Multi-agency strategy discussions to consider the need for a child protection enquiry when children are at risk, or have suffered significant harm, are not always timely. This is further compounded by delays in some police referrals to the Front Door when a police investigation has already started. This means that initial investigations are not informed by multi-agency information sharing to inform risk analysis, and subsequent planning and intervention is delayed. Once convened, these multi-agency meetings effectively share information and make appropriate decisions. In a small minority of children's cases, a health representative was not present. Actions from these meetings pay insufficient attention to planning the investigation or explicit interim safety planning for children.

Child protection enquiries are comprehensive, and provide a clear analysis of risk and the child's experience leading to appropriate decisions. For a small number of children, these enquiries take too long to complete.

Most children now have an up-to-date assessment that provides a clear understanding of their needs. However, the quality of children's assessments in understanding the wider context is variable. Some assessments are too narrow in focus, overly reliant on parental self-reporting, are not informed by those who know the child well and pay insufficient attention to the child's voice. Some assessments and reviews for children in need and in receipt of a financial or care support package are overly focused on whether the care package is appropriate. Increased risk factors may be evident in the narrative (for example, risk from or to brothers and sisters), but these do not always feature in the subsequent analysis or plan, and the potential impact for the child is not well considered.

The effectiveness and impact of social work support for children is inconsistent. Some children (particularly where neglect is a worry) wait too long for escalating concerns to be noted and acted on. A small number of children have been living in neglectful circumstances and subject to repeat child protection plans over a long period, with little evidence of sustainable change.

Some children experience too many changes of worker. This makes it difficult for children to form meaningful relationships and for workers to notice small changes in a child's presentation or interaction that would indicate progress or an increasing concern. This further compounds challenges in hearing a child's voice or views, particularly when they are non-verbal.

Children are mostly seen regularly and in line with their needs. However, the quality and purpose of visits is inconsistent. Many visits are adult focused. The frequency and quality of direct work with disabled children is hugely variable. For some, the child's voice is almost absent; for others, however, creative, carefully considered direct work has helped children to understand decisions and transitions and to ensure that their wishes and feelings are known.

Visiting frequency to children in receipt of packages of care or financial support has been increased. Six-monthly visits and telephone check-ins at three and nine months mean that children and their families can form stronger relationships with the practitioner, who has a greater understanding of the child's needs and can be responsive to any changes.

Disabled children's plans are captured within a 'My plan' document in West Sussex. Most of these provide a good sense of the child, their needs, and the tasks to achieve child-specific goals. They are written to the child and in an accessible format. Some children also have a child in need or child protection plan, meaning that children are subject to multiple plans, making it more difficult for parents to be clear about expectations of them. Leaders are aware of the duplication of the assessment and planning documents and are looking to see how these can be streamlined.

Disabled children cared for by West Sussex are living in homes that effectively meet their needs. Recent significant investment in the development of in-house residential care has enabled some children to appropriately move and live closer to family and friends. Children at one of these homes told inspectors that they were happy and safe living there. Where longstanding arrangements are at risk of breaking down, the local authority has provided additional support to meet the child's needs to maintain consistency for the child and prevent placement breakdown.

Most disabled children cared for by West Sussex benefit from strong multi-disciplinary support, where all are working together with a focus on improving children's experiences. Health and education needs are well considered, and a child-centred flexible approach supports children in continuing to have their education needs met. Some children benefit from excellent support to use and develop alternative communication skills.

Social workers know their children well and efforts are made to communicate with children using the communication style of the child and to understand their nonverbal signals. However, the child's voice, wishes and feelings are not consistently captured within their records.

Care experienced disabled young people's experience of transition is inconsistent. There is not a common understanding across the service of eligibility for a personal adviser or the local offer as it applies to disabled young people. The local authority is aware of this and has recently developed a joint protocol to support a smooth transition.

Carefully considered and analytical mental capacity and best interest decisions inform key decisions for some young people. There is insufficient oversight by managers of these decisions and supporting documents and their recommendations.

Care experienced disabled young people live in accommodation that meets their individual needs and the support they require. Some young people continue to live with their foster carers via staying put or shared lives arrangements. Most young people are seen regularly and supported by their personal advisers to further develop their life skills. Most pathway plans represent their voice, are completed collaboratively and set aspirational but realistic goals. For a minority of young people, workload pressures within the care leaving service have meant that young people have not been seen as often as they need, and pathway plans have been completed late, without the young person participating, and lack specificity about the young person's needs.

Systems and processes have been strengthened to ensure greater management oversight of work with disabled children. Expectations about the frequency of supervision for many social workers of disabled children have increased. As a result it is taking place more regularly. Some supervision records comprise a brief update and provide little sense of the child's experience, progress against a plan, or reflection.

Other records are purposeful, child focused, reflective and support the progression of children's plans to improve outcomes.

Leaders have engaged more effectively with parents including via the Parent Carer Forum, for example in the co-production of the revised eligibility criteria.

Compliance with the completion of audits is now consistently high. The quality of audits remains variable, but is improving. Inspectors saw some impact from audits on the progression of children's plans, but this is not consistent or always timely. There is an increasing understanding of what good social work practice looks like. The percentage of audits considered as inadequate internally and by external scrutiny is reducing, and while some audits are downgraded at moderation, this is now less frequent.

Some caseloads are too high, but practitioners mostly report their workload as manageable. Managers are seen to be accessible and supportive. Senior managers were described as accessible, visible and to be making a difference. Team managers have valued their participation in the assessment programme and the steps being taken to further support their development.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Tracey Scott
Her Majesty's Inspector