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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 30 March 2022. This was the fourth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in May 2019. Her Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Tracey Scott and Sarah Canto.

### **Areas covered by the visit**

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the following areas of concern identified at the last inspection:

- The quality and effectiveness of assessments, care planning and the support provided to children and young people in care.
- 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. This visit was carried out partly by remote means. Inspectors were on site but used video calls for discussions with some local authority staff.

### **Headline findings**

Senior leaders have an accurate understanding of practice in West Sussex and have remained resolute in their approach to improving support for children. The quality of social work practice and the experiences of the children in the care of West Sussex children's services have significantly improved since the May 2019 inspection. Political and corporate support, including considerable financial investment, has assisted with a continued focus on practice improvement and has enabled more children to live in local, stable homes. A reconstituted and strengthened corporate parenting board readily hears and responds to children's voices. Comprehensive performance reporting and oversight have ensured that many important performance

measures, such as timeliness of visits to children and reviews of their arrangements, have significantly improved, and this improvement is being sustained. The timeliness of initial health assessments and completion of strengths and difficulties questionnaires remain an area of focus for improvement. Child-centred, impactful audits provide a largely accurate view of practice and reflective learning opportunities for practitioners. However, the impact of audit on the progression of children's plans remains inconsistent. A multi-faceted approach to recruitment and retention is beginning to increase permanence and stability within the workforce. There is a tangible shift in culture within the organisation.

Recent service redesign and the implementation of a new practice model have prompted some turbulence within the wider service. This has included changes in social worker and a small number of unallocated children awaiting an assessment when first referred to the service. Senior leaders are confident that this is short-term and are focused on the incremental implementation of the model to further strengthen practice in West Sussex. Despite significant endeavour, the number of children living with friends and family in unapproved arrangements has not reduced. A small number of children are living in unregulated arrangements where the support and care being provided is not sufficient to meet their needs.

### **Findings and evaluation of progress**

Most children are living in arrangements that meet their needs and in settled, long-term homes. Their circumstances have improved, and many are doing well. A small number of vulnerable young people are living in unregulated arrangements that do not meet their current care and support needs. The local authority had recently reviewed these arrangements prior to inspectors being on site and had begun to take steps to strengthen the support and care children receive.

Some children continue to live in homes with family and friends' carers that fall below the expected standard for fostering regulations. Despite significant endeavour since the monitoring visit in May 2021, the number of children in such arrangements has remained similar to that of November 2021. This continues to be an area of real focus for the local authority.

Some children continue to experience too many changes of social worker, and this has an impact on the quality of relationships and on the progression of their plans. However, the frequency of this is reducing and increasingly the children the local authority cares for are able to develop meaningful relationships with their social worker.

Most children are seen regularly by their social workers. Thoughtful direct work and conversations with children enable them to express their wishes and feelings, and they create opportunities for children's experiences to be understood and for them to have a clear sense of the decisions that are made on their behalf and why, at a time that is right for them. For a few children, especially during times of change or

instability, the frequency of visits was not proportionate. Children told inspectors that they enjoy spending time with their social workers, and some said that they would like to see their social worker more often. Inspectors also saw a small number of visits being undertaken virtually, where the reason for this was not apparent.

Careful thought is given to the frequency of, and arrangements for, children to spend time with their family and others who are important to them. For some children, photographic story boards vividly capture time spent with family, to complement written records and inform future life story work.

The quality of records to and for children has improved. Records written to the child are reflective and show a real warmth and genuine care for the child.

Practitioners consider the progress of children and formulate plans to meet presenting needs effectively in timely reviews of children's looked after arrangements. The vast majority of reviews are taking place virtually and the return to face-to-face meetings has been too slow and not driven by children's needs. Some reviews would benefit from greater participation with partner agencies such as health or education. Most children are supported to attend and participate or are consulted prior to the meeting taking place. Sensitive letters are written to the child explaining what decisions have been made. These will help children understand their histories and the reason decisions were made for them. On occasion, language is too professional or jargonistic.

Initial health assessments are not taking place quickly enough. The local authority is aware of this and anticipates that a recent problem-solving event with health partners will lead to an improvement. Children's emotional well-being needs are being considered and addressed in key planning forums such as their children in care reviews and personal education plans. Children benefit from a range of emotional well-being support.

The virtual school is having an effective and positive impact on the support provided to children in relation to their education and well-being. The vast majority of children now benefit from having a personal education plan, the quality of which is improving and helping children reach their potential. School staff value the support and responsive communication provided by the virtual school.

Strengthened practice, increased awareness and management oversight of permanence planning has significantly enabled greater security and stability for many children. A small number continue to experience delay in this being achieved for them.

The allocation of personal advisers for children to support their transition to adulthood is not taking place early enough. The local authority is aware of this and has secured additional investment to increase capacity to meet the need.

Leaders have responded positively to the need to provide care for a greater number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children via the National Transfer Scheme. Interpreters are used to support assessments and visits, and access to education is swift. Children and young people benefit from the support of a specialist Child and Adolescent Mental Health worker in addressing their emotional health needs. Practitioners are mindful of children's situations, and of their identities. They seek children's wishes and feelings, and focus strongly on ensuring that community networks are strengthened.

Most supervision is in line with the local authorities practice expectation but not always in keeping with the level of complexity and need. Most records of supervision provide an update for the child. However, although these records have improved, the extent of reflection and analysis, and of the impact that they have on progressing the child's plan remains inconsistent.

The implementation of a comprehensive participation strategy has ensured that children's voices are actively sought, heard and responded to. Children are involved in the training and recruitment of carers and staff, and their views inform service planning. A well-run children in care council is cohesive and productive. A range of events are organised, so children have opportunities to develop their skills, share experiences and, importantly, enjoy fun activities. Children's presence at corporate parenting meetings is meaningful and influential and has resulted in senior leaders positively receiving challenge to improve children's lives.

The independent reviewing officer's footprint is more evident on children's files. While stronger than previously, the timely impact of this for the child isn't always evident. The quality of the relationship between the independent reviewing officer and the child is also inconsistent, with some children benefiting from visits and communication between reviews and others being absent from the child's life between reviews.

Leaders actively responded to the challenge of placement sufficiency in West Sussex. Significant financial investment has supported an increase in local fostering capacity and high-quality residential provision, enabling more children to live closer to home, their communities and networks.

Comprehensive performance reporting and oversight provides an effective line of sight to practice. This has supported sustained compliance in a number of key areas.

The constitution, profile and effectiveness of the corporate parenting board has significantly improved. The chair of the board is highly committed to ensuring that children are empowered to participate and influence the work of the board. She continues to strive to raise the profile of corporate parenting and increase meaningful engagement across all members and leaders within the council.

Compliance with audit completion and a rigorous approach to moderation have been sustained. Increasingly, there is a shared understanding of what good practice looks like, and there is a significantly reduced number of children's experiences now considered by the local authority to be inadequate. The implementation of a new quality assurance framework and audit tool in November 2021 has supported an increasingly child-centred and impactful audit narrative and process to support a reflective learning approach. However, the impact on the progression of children's plans remains inconsistent. Leaders have recognised this and have plans to provide greater oversight of these children to ensure a timelier improvement to children's circumstances.

A comprehensive approach to recruitment and retention is beginning to reap positive results. While some parts of the service are more challenging to recruit to, the 'children we care for' workforce is almost all permanent staff, which creates greater stability and consistency for children.

Caseloads remain too high in some parts of the service, but the vast majority of practitioners report their workload to be manageable.

Inspectors observed a growing sense of optimism, enthusiasm and belief within the workforce. Leaders and managers are visible. Practitioners are excited and enthusiastic for the implementation of the new practice model.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Tracey Scott  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**