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County Hall, West Street
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Dear Lucy

Monitoring visit to West Sussex local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to West Sussex local authority children's services on 21 and 22 September 2022. The visit was the fifth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in May 2019. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Tracey Scott and Andrew Waugh.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the help and protection of children, with a particular focus on children subject to a child-in-need plan or child protection plan. Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the following areas of concern identified at the last inspection:

- The quality of social work practice, to assess, support and protect children, including children living in private fostering arrangements and 16- and 17-year-old homeless children.
- The quality and effectiveness of child-in-need and child protection plans.
- The quality, timeliness and impact of supervision, management oversight and decision-making, for children in need of help and protection.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records and other information provided by staff and managers. Inspectors spoke to a range of staff, including managers, social workers and other practitioners. In addition, inspectors spoke to children, young people and parents.

Headline findings

Children's services in West Sussex continue to improve, with some emerging strengths, although progress in some areas is too slow. The experienced, committed and stable senior leadership team has a clear vision for ongoing improvement and

the service benefits from strong corporate and political support. Senior leaders have a clear vision and practitioners are excited by the recent implementation of a social work practice model.

The improvement journey has continued with significant service redesign, a restructure and the introduction of a new practice model in February 2022. Initial turbulence caused by the introduction of the new model resulted in a temporary decline in key performance measures. This subsequently improved, although increases in demand and in the complexity of children's needs, alongside challenges with the turnover of agency social workers and the recruitment of permanent social workers, resulted in another performance dip over the summer. Some children are unallocated to a worker while awaiting an assessment, or during subsequent intervention, as a result of staff shortages. The quality and impact of social work intervention are variable, although some practice is strong. Too many children experience changes of social workers, and they are waiting too long for assessment and to receive the support that they need. Some plans for children in need of protection end prematurely at the first review.

Caseloads for some social workers in the help and protection part of the service are higher than local authority policy. Senior leaders are aware of this and have maintained a relentless focus on recruitment. The quality of auditing has further improved, and most audits are strong. If inadequate practice is identified, action is taken quickly to improve children's circumstances. Practitioners respond appropriately to the needs of children living in private fostering arrangements. The response to 16- and 17-year-old homeless children is not effective, as workers do not always fully assess whether the child should be accommodated by the local authority and do not provide sufficient oversight of the quality of provision and support.

Findings and evaluation of progress

An increase in demand and in the complexity of concerns for children as a result of the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, alongside significant recruitment challenges, mean that a small number of children are waiting too long for assessment and help. The progression of some children's plans is further compounded by too many changes of social worker. A small number of children are unallocated or are allocated to team managers, although no children were found to be at risk of significant harm. Management oversight for these children is regular and appropriate, but visits are undertaken by duty social workers, or child and family workers, leaving some parents and carers frustrated.

The quality and impact of social work practice for children in need and children in need of protection are very variable. Children with a consistent social worker benefit from the opportunity to build positive, trusting relationships that support effective interventions and change in their lives. Social workers understand the children's needs and the impact of past experiences on their lives. Inspectors saw many examples of purposeful, creative direct work with children and their families to help them to understand their experiences and to improve outcomes. Many written

records are thoughtful, and sensitively written to the child. This is reflected in the conversations inspectors had with children and parents about their experiences. All felt listened to and reported that their social worker sees them regularly and does what they say they will do. One parent described their social worker as 'absolutely amazing' and making a real difference for her family.

Conversely, children experiencing a number of changes of social worker and visits by duty social workers have not seen such positive changes, with the progression of plans to improve their lives being stunted or stopped and started again. This is further compounded for some with changes of team manager alongside changes of social worker.

Most assessments of children's needs are informed by the child's voice, the parents' views and partner agency contributions. The impact of presenting risks for children is well considered, leading to appropriate outcomes. For some children, insufficient attention is given to the impact of past experiences for both child and parent when considering their current needs.

When concerns for children increase, the majority of strategy discussions are timely. Where there was delay, inspectors did not see any detriment to children. Most strategy discussions are well attended and provide a forum for effective multi-agency information sharing and risk assessment. Child protection enquiries are comprehensive, conclude appropriately and demonstrate effective safety planning to manage risk for children.

The quality and effectiveness of plans for children are inconsistent. Most address current risks and needs. Stronger plans are specific about outcomes, how these will be achieved, the timescale for change and who is responsible. Weaker plans are less clear about what needs to happen, by when, and the subsequent impact for the child.

Most core groups to review child protection plans are held regularly and supported by appropriate multi-agency attendance. Inspectors saw examples of strong multi-agency information sharing and communication, but inconsistency of impact in progressing children's plans.

Reports for some review child protection conferences do not sufficiently reflect the depth of a child's history or analysis about progress against the plan to support decision-making effectively. In part, this is due to a system change and the use of core group minutes as the review conference report. The quality of the report is highly dependent on the timing of the core group, consistent core group membership, full attendance at the core group and the quality of minutes. Senior managers are aware of the potential impact of this change in practice and plan to review impact after a three-month period.

A strengths-based approach and increased management oversight of plans for children subject to child protection plans have appropriately supported a reduction in the length of time that children are subject to such plans. However, recent decisions

to end some children's plans at first review have been premature and overly optimistic. Senior leaders are now ensuring that child-in-need plans for these children are subject to additional scrutiny.

Children who spoke to inspectors were overwhelmingly positive about their experience of advocacy at child protection conferences, with comments such as 'He tells my part' and 'is massively helpful...shares my point'.

Children living in private fostering arrangements benefit from timely, comprehensive assessments and social work visits. The team is now aligned with the family safeguarding service and a previous backlog of assessments has been cleared. The number of children known to be living in private fostering arrangements is low. A recent awareness-raising campaign has seen an increase in enquiries, but not an increase in referrals. A small number of children in private fostering arrangements also receive support as children in need. Child-in-need plans are regularly reviewed, but these are not informed by an updated assessment of their needs.

The local authority's response to vulnerable 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless or imminently homeless is not effective. The integration of the Youth Homeless Prevention Team into children's social care is beginning to raise awareness and strengthen joint working to meet children's needs. Despite a real commitment to supporting children at home when safe to do so, proactive intervention to rebuild fractured relationships is not always evident or timely. Assessments of children's needs do not always consider whether the children would benefit from being in care. Young people are not provided with timely information or advocacy support to inform their decision-making.

One young person told inspectors that the shared accommodation was unclean and not suitable. The commissioning and quality oversight of this provision currently sit outside of children's services and therefore there is limited line of sight. Leaders reported that there is a plan for this to transfer to them in November 2022 to align with the oversight of supported accommodation for children in care and care leavers. During the inspection, leaders agreed to assure themselves of the living arrangements for 16- and 17-year-olds living in supported accommodation.

A multi-agency triage team that was developed to respond to increasingly complex mental health needs of children and young people successfully supports a number of schools in West Sussex. The needs of children and young people are considered at a daily triage meeting; this ensures that they receive a comprehensive and timely response, proportionate to their level of need. In addition, the children's mental health and emotional well-being team provides specialist support, advice, guidance and challenge to social workers and partners to ensure that children's complex mental health and well-being needs are understood and met effectively. This approach is building capacity and resilience within the service, alongside ensuring that children access the right support from the right service at the right time.

The quality and impact of supervision are improving but remain variable. Stronger supervision records include a review of previous actions, a clear update of the child's

circumstances, a real sense of the child, balanced reflection, analysis, and appropriate time-bound next steps to support the progression of the plan. In weaker records, the focus is narrow, the child's voice and experiences are not captured well, analysis is weak and there is a lack of challenge to support the implementation of the plan.

Workloads for some social workers in this part of the service are too high to deliver meaningful work and to maintain up-to-date recording. There is a continued focus on recruitment, which includes recent successful overseas recruitment. Social workers believe that leaders are doing all that they can to address recruitment challenges and they feel well supported by team managers. They are excited by the new practice model but recognise that it is early days. They understand the vision and feel that leaders are taking social workers with them on the improvement journey. They are optimistic for the future.

Comprehensive performance information is available to managers to support the progression of children's plans, although the impact and effectiveness across the teams are inconsistent. Recent performance meetings with the director of children's services and individual teams have helped to develop a greater understanding of the challenges they face in achieving key performance measures.

Recent audit activity has focused on children subject to child-in-need and child protection plans. The audits have identified weaknesses and senior managers recognise that this practice area needs ongoing focus and improvement. The quality and impact of audit activity have continued to improve. Many audits are child-centred and provide a clear and accurate evaluation of practice. When completed collaboratively with practitioners, audits provide a real opportunity for live, reflective learning discussions. An increasing consistency in auditor and moderator findings indicates a growing shared understanding of practice expectations. The impact of audit on children's plans remains inconsistent, with some actions not being followed through in a timely way. However, a strengthened approach and oversight when inadequate practice is identified mean that those children's circumstances now quickly improve.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Tracey Scott
His Majesty's Inspector