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Dear Cathi

Monitoring visit to Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole children's services on 4 and 5 October 2022. This was the second monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in December 2021. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Steve Lowe and Louise Hocking.

Areas covered by the visit

The focus of the monitoring visit was children in need and those subject to a child protection plan, namely those children who are at risk of significant harm or who require support to achieve or maintain a reasonable standard of health or development. In particular, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the following areas of concern identified at the last inspection:

- The quality of practice, in particular assessment, the use and completion of chronologies, the response to domestic violence and the recording of children's views.
- The timeliness of social work intervention and support for unborn and very young children at risk of significant harm.
- The impact of quality assurance and management oversight on the standard of social work practice and progressing work effectively to avoid delay for children.
- The recruitment and retention of a workforce that is experienced, competent and confident to deliver improvements, so that children no longer have multiple changes of social worker.

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

Headline findings

At the time of the last inspection, too many children in Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole were not being kept safe. It was of particular concern that very young children were left in unsafe situations where the risks to their welfare were not assessed or met. The quality of social work that families experienced was inconsistent, due to a high turnover of staff and failings in very basic social work practice.

From this very low starting point, there has been a concerted effort by senior leaders in children's services to put the right structures in place, to encourage more timely decisions and actions, and to better safeguard children. The local authority, supported by improvement partners, now has a sensible, sustainable plan in place aimed at providing a better-quality service for children. Although there is much more to do before children receive consistently good services, these measures have helped to deliver steady progress. The overall quality of social work is slowly improving and staff are increasingly confident in tackling risks to the most vulnerable. While staff turnover is still higher than senior leaders would wish, these improvements are equally evident in the temporary workforce when those workers have remained in post for several months or more.

However, some children still experience delays in getting the help and protection they need. The absence of a clear, unified approach of 'this is how we do it here' for staff leads to inconsistent decision-making in child protection conferences, poor planning and a lack of depth in assessing and analysing the underlying reasons for chronic neglect and the impact of domestic abuse on children.

The impact of local government reorganisation has been, and continues to be, a challenge for the local authority, with such tasks as harmonising different systems and working practices posing a barrier to sufficiently timely progress. This has also, at times, made it more difficult for the local authority's political and corporate leaders to take a whole-council approach to supporting positive change for children. The consolidation of recent improvements is reliant upon overcoming those barriers.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Pockets of better and more consistent social work with increasingly regular management oversight and growing staff confidence are leading to some positive results for children. Some more recent work does show a step in the right direction in terms of tackling the risk factors with families who have experienced cyclical but unsuccessful periods of social work involvement, often over many years. Some families understandably lack trust in social workers due to multiple changes in the past. This often leads to delay for children as it takes longer to establish impactful working relationships with children and their parents. Increasing stability in teams and more manageable caseloads are now beginning to give social workers more time to repair these relationships effectively.

Social workers know children well. They speak in detail about their work and their engagement with children and their families. There are examples of increasing curiosity and more creative thinking when social workers visit families, including varying announced and unannounced visits and where children are seen. On occasion, staff find it hard to articulate the impact of their work when it is evident that they are having a positive impact on outcomes for children. Senior leaders have wisely identified the need for a unified practice model to strengthen this further.

Thresholds for intervening in families to provide support are largely applied appropriately and children are supported at a level that is commensurate with their level of need and the degree of risk of harm. This is also generally the case when the level of risk and need varies over time. Crucially, a clear process and timeline for assessing risks to unborn babies, and responding accordingly, is now in place and starting to embed across both children's services and partner agencies.

There is progress in complying with statutory guidance when children are the subject of a child protection plan. Child protection inquiries and strategy discussions take place as and when needed, child protection plans are in place, core groups happen and children are visited more regularly. Many social workers are working with high, sometimes only just manageable, numbers of children and understandably tend to prioritise work with those who are at the highest risk. Consequently, children in need who are not the subject of a child protection plan are less likely to have an up-to-date assessment or review and one in five have not been seen in accordance with the frequency agreed in their plans. As a result, they wait longer to receive the support that they need, increasing the chances of risks escalating.

Although more agreed actions are being completed for children and families, there are several areas of practice that have yet to see the quality and depth that underpins effective social work.

Assessments of children's situations are not yet routinely updated, particularly when they move from one parent to another, or for disabled children when their circumstances change. Assessments often fail to analyse the underlying causes of tension in family relationships and focus only on the present situation. Meaningful chronologies that add impact and focus are rare.

There is evidence of regular management oversight in all children's cases, but it can sometimes lack focus on how children are affected by where they live and the trauma they face, especially when they are living in chronic conditions of neglect over a prolonged period.

Child protection conference decisions are inconsistent. While high staff turnover has played a part in this, the absence of a sufficiently robust frontline management approach in this area has had a greater impact. The subsequent child protection plans are either generic or place too much emphasis on actions and tasks rather than impact and change. Consequently, families are often left not knowing what must

happen as a priority, what the main concerns are and what they need to do to achieve success. There are a small number of examples where this has been done well, and for these children it is easy to see how this translates into more rapid progress.

When domestic abuse and chronic neglect are the key concerns in a family there is often an overreliance on the mother being protective and on parents attending programmes and courses, some of which have long waiting lists. This issue was a concern raised at the last inspection. As a result of this, and of male perpetrators of domestic abuse leaving the family home in the short term too often being seen as a long-term solution, some children are left in neglectful or upsetting circumstances for longer than necessary. In stronger examples, fathers and wider family members are better engaged in addressing the issues in the family and their involvement has a positive impact on sustainable change.

The positive and purposeful work by specialist services such as the complex safeguarding and edge of care teams seen during the last inspection continues. Encouragingly, the positive impact of this work has been sustained. Senior leaders are very aware that this success should not lead to good practice only existing in silos and they have plans in place to broaden rather than to dilute this success.

There is improvement in how well the voices and feelings of children are captured. In visits and reviews, however less so in assessments, a sense of who children are and what they would like to see change is included. Children are supported to attend conferences or to contribute through an advocate and this is helping to shape plans. This improvement also extends to how children are engaged by social workers to share their story.

When risks escalate to the point of using the pre-proceedings process under the Public Law Outline (PLO), work is carried out under the clear and organised oversight of a service manager who understands the work and children's needs very well. A clear and closely maintained tracker is used to monitor progress for children effectively. The skilled and permanently staffed court team is increasingly helping to prevent children from having to come into care, using well-planned, thoughtful and targeted direct work with children and families.

Mindful of the need for all social workers to understand the court process, a training programme has been set up for all social workers in the wider workforce so that they better understand the PLO process and gain confidence in going to court.

Staff, both permanent and agency, report feeling well supported, including when they are affected personally by their work. Staff morale is palpably on the up. Many staff talked about good levels of support and access to training that is in line with their experience, development needs and areas of interest. Encouragingly, staff now talk about 'BCP' as one organisation, rather than still feeling attached to the local authority's constituent organisations that they worked for previously. In part, this is

due to the influx of staff from other parts of the country shifting the culture and making a positive difference.

Developing and implementing a quality assurance framework for assessing, testing and driving improvements in practice has been a major task, given that at the time of the last inspection the approach was entirely under-developed. Practice learning reviews (PLRs), where auditors evaluate practice, are now more common and more widely accepted by the workforce as having value. The number of PLRs which are completed is increasing and they identify most of the key areas where practice could be improved. Although starting to shift towards the quality of practice, they are yet to have sufficient focus on the impact of the work on the child. While social workers who have experienced a PLR find it challenging and useful, actions identified during the PLR are not automatically fed into supervision or case records, so learning is yet to be translated into positive change for children.

Managers' ability to track performance is more systematic than it was, and is increasingly rigorous and focused on emerging trends. The ongoing delays in switching to one system for the recording of data and case records have hampered progress in live reporting. However, senior leaders now have permanent service managers who use a suite of regular, established meetings at all levels to maintain a much closer view of performance. This enables a more accurate approach to forward planning and a more fully informed response when performance drops in key areas of practice.

Against the backdrop of local government reorganisation and in the context of rising need and resource pressures, the local authority's corporate and political commitment to improvement is being tested to the full. These pressures have, at times, made it difficult to adopt a whole-council approach to driving progress. The children's services senior management team understands the areas that need further improvement and the wider council's backing must continue to be a key factor in supporting further progress.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Steve Lowe
His Majesty's Inspector