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Executive Director of Children and Learning  
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Dear Mr Henderson

### **Focused visit to Southampton City Council children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Southampton City Council children's services on 22 to 23 November 2022. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Anna Gravelle and Joy Howick.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need, including those who are subject to a child protection plan.

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

### **Headline findings**

Southampton City Council has made progress, since the last Ofsted visit in May 2021, in how it improves the experiences and outcomes for children in need of help and protection. Most children in need and those subject to child protection plans are visited regularly. They receive help from social workers that makes a positive difference to them. Social workers are now much more likely to be permanent members of staff and to have a manageable caseload. On this visit, inspectors did not identify any children at immediate risk of harm.

However, inspectors identified areas of weaker practice in the quality of supervision and management oversight of children on child protection and child in need plans. These areas, which were highlighted at the previous visit and at the last Ofsted inspection in 2019, have been slow to improve and are not at the standard to which the local authority aspires. Similarly, the quality assurance framework is not effective enough in identifying areas for improvement or to disseminate this learning to improve practice for children and families.

Significant corporate support and financial investment has assisted in creating a more stable and assured workforce, and in progressing the local authority's ongoing redesign of children's services, and has underpinned the progress achieved.

## **What needs to improve in this area of social work practice?**

- The quality of assessments and plans, and of how effectively plans are used to monitor and drive progress for children.
- The quality of audits and of how effectively they, and the wider quality assurance framework, are used to understand and improve the quality and impact of practice with children and their families.

## **Main findings**

A commitment to an 'open door' approach and to developing a learning culture by the now permanent senior leadership team has had a positive impact on staff morale and on the culture of the service. While senior leaders recognise that there is more work to do, social workers are reassured by the increased visibility of the senior leadership team and are overwhelmingly engaged with the service redesign. This is making a progressively positive difference to the quality of practice. Although the quality of practice remains inconsistent overall, there is an improvement in how well children are helped and protected.

Partner agencies speak positively about improved working relationships with the local authority. School, health and police leaders also say that the quality of practice has stepped up since the time of last inspection visit when they consider it to have been at a 'low base'. Partners report that the local authority's senior leadership team and the improved partnership working give them confidence that progress will be sustained and continued.

Decisions about the thresholds for when children should become the subject of child in need or child protection plans are almost always appropriate and only a very few children wait too long to become the subject of a plan and to receive support. Decisions about the point at which children should 'step up' or 'step down' between child protection planning and child in need support, or between child in need support and early help, are also predominantly well-matched to children's individual circumstances and levels of need and risk.

Children are visited regularly and at a frequency that matches their needs. Children benefit from workers who make efforts to see them at school, with family and at home. Social workers mostly record the wishes and feelings of children. However, direct work is often not sufficiently purposeful and, while some stronger examples of bespoke work with children were seen, this is too often dependent on the initiative of individual workers.

The quality of assessments has improved since Ofsted's last visit but, overall, remains inconsistent. About a third of assessments lack the necessary sharpness and depth of analysis found in the better assessments. Children's past experiences, the impact on them of the parenting they are receiving, and their current needs are not

always considered in sufficient depth. Recommendations for next steps sometimes lack clarity.

Social workers do not consistently identify the cumulative impact of chronic patterns of risk and neglect for children well enough. Senior leaders, together with the local multi-agency partnership, have started to introduce the use of a neglect toolkit to support practitioners in this work, but this is not rooted in practice and its impact on work with children is not evident. A few children have experienced some delay in their needs being met. Children whose level of need is such that they may be at risk of needing to come into care to ensure that their welfare is promoted receive thorough and effective support to prevent this from becoming necessary.

Generally, the quality of child in need and child protection plans has improved since the last visit and most now contain actions that are appropriately matched to children's circumstances, needs and level of risk. However, too many actions in children's plans lack specificity and timescales, and this makes it harder to measure impact and to use plans to drive improvement for children. For a small number of children, child protection plans have ended without meaningful work taking place to achieve the right outcomes.

The quality of case recording for children is not strong. Most records do not include succinct summaries of children's histories or experiences, nor do they provide an up-to-date summary of children's current progress and needs. The absence of case summaries and chronologies limits social worker's ability to identify patterns of harm and the subsequent impact on children. Records of home visits and interventions with families are often confusing to read. This will make it harder for those children, who may come back in later life to view their records, to understand their own histories and why important decisions were made that affected them and their families.

When progress is not being achieved for children who are the subject of child protection plans, decisions to move to the pre-proceedings element of the public law outline are well thought out and implemented. This is an area of strength in the local authority's work with families.

There is a timely escalation to pre-proceedings for relevant children. Senior leaders have a robust legal planning process in place for tracking and decision-making around pre-proceedings, including initiating care proceedings for children when all other options have been exhausted. Social workers demonstrate appropriate professional curiosity and robust assessment of risk in this work and most write sensitive pre-proceedings letters to parents that clearly set out the concerns and highlight what needs to improve. Social workers ensure that letters avoid jargon to help parents understand the issues and to provide opportunity for meaningful work to take place.

Children on the edge of care due to a risk of family breakdown receive a timely service from a good range of well-aligned services that provide effective support for most children. Inspectors observed examples of impactful work that is strengthening family capacity and enabling children to remain at home with their families.

Disabled children receive effective support from social workers in the Jigsaw team who understand their needs well. Social workers complete comprehensive assessments that lead to detailed and measurable child in need and child protection plans. Social workers highlight historical patterns of abuse, through assessment of risk. Inspectors observed stronger and more consistent child protection and child-in-need planning with this service that is leading to sustained change and progress for most children. Social workers spend time building relationships with children that help to capture children's voices through bespoke and effective direct work.

Social workers generally receive timely supervision. Progress in the quality of supervision has, however, been slower. Not all managers are providing reflective, purposeful supervision that enables social workers to consider the experiences of children and the impact of their practice on making changes to children's lives. Managers do not consistently provide clear direction or monitor the completion of actions and progress achieved since previous supervision sessions.

Social workers speak positively about the local authority training offer, including the roll out of a systemic model of practice. Although staff are enthusiastic about this model, it is only just beginning to become embedded in practice, and so impact is consequently limited at this point in time. Social workers appreciate the comprehensive induction process as well. The local authority makes its full training offer open to all staff, including agency social workers, to maximise its impact in improving practice and creating a cohesive culture and approach across all staff, whatever their employment status.

Senior leaders have focused much time and investment on 'growing their own' workers to build a more permanent staff team. This has started to show marked improvement since the last visit, where there was heavy reliance on a significant number of agency staff with the resulting impact on children from a higher turnover of staff. Senior leaders have ensured that a far higher percentage of staff are now permanent Southampton social workers. This means that children are now much more likely to have the opportunity to build a relationship of trust with a worker and less likely to experience multiple changes of worker.

The local authority has made limited progress in improving the effectiveness of its quality assurance framework since the last inspection. Practice audits are now consistently taking place but are weak. Audits do not always identify areas for improvement, necessary actions or key learning, and rarely involve social workers directly. This means that the local authority is not getting the best value it could from audits, either in terms of driving progress for individual children or in providing aggregated learning that can help drive progress at a strategic level. However, more

recent thematic audits, such as of work to tackle domestic abuse and of child protection investigations, are stronger and have enabled the local authority to gain learning that is helping to shape and to improve practice. Senior leaders are aware of these shortfalls and recognise that improvement in this area of work needs to be more consistent and to pick up pace.

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

Yours sincerely

Anna Gravelle  
His Majesty's Inspector