

27 February 2024

Sarah Hammond
Corporate Director - Children, Young People and Education
Sessions House
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Dear Ms Hammond

Focused visit to Kent County Council local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Kent County Council local authority children's services on 23 and 24 January 2024. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Amanda Maxwell, Russel Breyer and Rebecca Dubbins.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for the 'front door', with a specific focus on assessments and decision-making, including child protection enquiries and decisions to accommodate children. This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including children's records. They talked to children, a parent, a carer, practitioners and managers, and representatives from the corporate leadership team.

Headline findings

Most children referred to the 'front door' service receive a timely and appropriate response. Managers and social workers demonstrate a clear understanding of risk. Thresholds are applied appropriately, with regular and effective management oversight. Decisions are informed by children's voices and needs, and consideration of family history and circumstances.

There have been some changes to the senior leadership of children's services since the last inspection in May 2022, including a new corporate director for children, young people and education, as well as other new senior managers. Senior leaders in Kent have continued to focus on and embed improvements to address the areas for development noted at the last inspection. Changes made to the response to young people aged 16 and 17 years who present as homeless, and the quality of assessments of need, have improved young people's experiences. Leaders have also reviewed and altered the practice of conducting visits to children during school hours. Extensive work has been carried out to review and reduce staff caseloads and provide workload support for social workers. Leaders are continuing to analyse workload demands and pressures in order to manage these effectively in the longer

term. There has been an increasing number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children arriving in Kent in recent years and this, in turn, has increased the demands on children's services; senior leaders are continuing to be flexible and child-centred in their work with children at the 'front door'.

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

- The quality and impact of management oversight and supervision.
- Work with health partners to improve their contribution to decision-making meetings regarding safeguarding.

Main findings

Most children in Kent receive a timely, appropriate and proportionate response to their needs. There is clarity about referral outcomes and the next steps required to support children and their families while assessments of their needs are carried out. Referrals are received from a wide variety of professionals and most of these are timely and appropriate. The quality of referrals has improved since the implementation of and training in the application of the 'Kent Support Levels', the threshold guidance regarding levels of support and intervention. Some gaps remain in timely information-sharing between the police and the local authority, which senior leaders continue to address.

Children are allocated swiftly to a social worker, with clear and appropriate management decision-making about risk and the level of intervention required. When concerns increase, children are stepped up to the required level of intervention and support. In a small minority of cases, there is a lack of evidence to explain the rationale and decision-making.

Most assessments are of high quality and are carried out in a timely way. They are informed by family history and an understanding of the child's lived experience. Analysis is strong and clear about the factors that increase risk and the intervention that is required to make children safer. Children's cultural and identity needs are well considered and explored alongside family strengths and vulnerabilities. Help and intervention are provided during the assessment process and children and their families are seen at regular intervals, which enables workers to gain a fuller understanding about the child's daily life. Social workers work in partnership with parents to effect change for children, while also making clear contingency plans. This means that children get the right support at the right time and which is proportionate to their needs.

Most children are seen regularly and their voice and views regarding their experiences are sought. Children are given opportunities to explore their circumstances, aspirations and wishes through a variety of creative artwork, conversations, games and the use of direct work tools. Child-focused work helps social workers to understand a child's lived experience. Children's records are written

thoughtfully and respectfully to the child, using child-friendly language. Records show that children's needs are well understood and that plans are made with their safety, well-being and wishes in mind.

Social workers are persistent and creative in working with parents. Parents' views are sought and included in the planning. In particular, efforts are made to include fathers in the work, which impacts positively on children's outcomes. Senior leaders have supported social workers to focus on engaging and involving all parents and carers in assessments and interventions; this benefits children, as their parents feel empowered and able to contribute and engage in plans. Children and parents are helped by direct work and also supported to access a wide range of resources, such as substance misuse services for parents and therapeutic help for children. Disabled children have their risks and vulnerabilities well considered and met. When risks increase, there is appropriate action to safeguard children.

Strategy meetings are mostly timely, detailed and thorough. Risks are well considered and lead to suitable decisions that guide and inform next steps. There is routine attendance by police, education and social care, but inconsistent representation from health.

Child protection investigations are carried out promptly. In most cases, consideration of risk and decision-making is appropriate. Initial child protection conferences are well attended by most partners, apart from health professionals, and result in clear, time-limited plans.

Assessments of risks and vulnerabilities for unborn babies and those under one year old are thorough and well considered. There is clarity in the process about what is needed and where decision-making lies regarding next steps, support and intervention. This ensures that there is shared responsibility when considering the particular needs of these children.

Most 16 and 17-year-old homeless children receive an appropriate response to their individual needs. Leaders and managers have reviewed and amended their corporate response. Changes have been made to the joint housing assessment process and there is a focus on ensuring that children have a voice. Children are now better informed of their rights and entitlements.

Most social workers show a good awareness and understanding about the risks associated with exploitation and they carry out the appropriate assessments, intervention and referrals to others to manage and minimise those risks.

The impact of domestic abuse on children and their families is well understood. Workers are swift to identify domestic abuse and harm and are knowledgeable about the appropriate services and support available.

Case supervision is generally task-focused and occurs at three-monthly intervals. On occasions, there is additional recorded supervision if there is a significant change in a child's circumstances. In some cases, this is supplemented by increased management oversight and case direction. However, there is inconsistency in management oversight and supervision for the shorter-term pieces of social work intervention and support. It is not clear how managers guide or oversee this practice.

There is a strong learning culture in Kent. Social workers have access to a wide variety of learning and development opportunities which support their practice. Staff speak with pride about their achievements and the in-house accreditation schemes which enable them to develop their skills and make progress in their careers. The high number of newly qualified social workers are all enrolled in the assessed and supported year in employment programme. Senior leaders have recognised that further clarity and direction are needed regarding the types of casework these social workers hold or co-work. This is to ensure that workers are well supported and safeguarded while developing and progressing their social work skills. Social workers talk positively about their managers and senior leaders and describe feeling 'well supported' in their continued professional development.

Although the caseload average across the county has reduced since the last inspection, some individual caseloads have at times been too high. This has impacted on social workers' ability to complete the required tasks to the standard that they would wish. Senior leaders are very aware of this and have undertaken various and detailed activities to gain a better understanding about caseloads, impact and how to support staff to ensure that casework does not drift. There continues to be more to do, to sustain and embed the recent improvements made.

Leaders and managers have access to an extensive array of information that enables them to maintain and develop their understanding about the quality and impact of practice. The clear and detailed approach to quality assurance ensures that all leaders maintain a current and accurate overview about the impact of their service, support and interventions.

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

Yours sincerely

Amanda Maxwell

His Majesty's Inspector