

26 March 2024

Sarah-Jane Smedmor
Director of Children's Services
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Dear Ms Smedmor,

Focused visit to Central Bedfordshire local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Central Bedfordshire local authority children's services on 20 and 21 February 2024. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Nhlanganiso Nyathi and Sophie Wales.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements and support for children in need, including those children who are subject to a child protection plan. This visit focused specifically on:

- Step-up/step-down arrangements between children in need and child protection.
- Children subject to a letter before proceedings and the quality and impact of pre-proceedings interventions.
- Protection of disabled children.

This visit was conducted in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers and managers. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's records.

Headline findings

Since the local authority was last inspected, in 2022, the support and management oversight for children in need of help and protection have strengthened. Thresholds are well understood and applied. Child protection chairs' oversight and challenge ensure that the vast majority of children, including those with complex needs, are safeguarded effectively. Practice adheres to a well-embedded ethos of 'not working to but with' the children and their parents. Social workers engage parents with

sensitivity. There is a well-developed response from partner agencies, which supports professionals to work in an integrated way with the most vulnerable children and families. Children's records are written sensitively about and to children. The Public Law Outline (PLO) is effective in diverting children in pre-proceedings away from progressing into the court process, enabling them to remain within their family networks and communities. However, direct work is not consistently recorded and not all children who would benefit from advocacy services are accessing this support. Audits do not consistently identify strong or weak practice. Work on improving the quality and impact of the overall performance and quality assurance (QA) process is firmly under way.

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

- The effective use of advocacy for children, their parents and carers.
- The quality and consistent use of direct work with children.
- The pace of ensuring effectiveness, quality and impact of audits.

Main findings

Children in Central Bedfordshire benefit from passionate and skilled social workers who know them well and who work with purpose. Children receive regular and purposeful visits at a frequency that reflects their needs and level of vulnerability. Children's views are taken seriously and acted on to meaningfully inform planning and social work practice. This helps ensure needs and risks are appropriately identified and acted on swiftly.

Social workers understand and apply thresholds for children in need and child protection effectively, which enables them to provide timely and proportionate intervention. Most children are stepped up and down from children in need and child protection interventions appropriately and at the right time, following clear and high-quality assessments which engage children, their parents and other agencies. The safeguarding partnership has been strengthened and the relationship with the local authority is enabling the partners to fulfil their mandate. The rationale for decision-making on closing children's cases or signposting children and families to other services is clear.

Most assessments of children's needs are comprehensive, dynamic and well written, with clear evaluation of strengths and risks. Assessments are informed by effective information-gathering from partner agencies and comprehensive family histories. Social workers have a clear focus on children's needs and risks and make good use of assessment tools such as the local authority's preferred tool for considering neglect. This results in a holistic and detailed understanding of the needs and risks for children, including those with complex needs.

Social workers routinely engage sensitively with parents and wider families. Where parents' main language is not English, there is effective use of interpreting services

during meetings and in translating some records. When required, family group conferences are used effectively to gather support from a child's wider family. Relationship-based practice enables social workers to have honest and open conversations with families. Meaningful engagement with parents, including absent or separated fathers and wider family members, ensures children remain connected with their family networks and local communities.

Children's plans are of consistently high quality, detailing what needs to change to reduce risk and meet children's needs in a timely manner. Timely twin tracking ensures that children have appropriate plans that match their needs and vulnerability. The plans are reviewed regularly at multi-agency meetings, which involve a range of relevant professionals whose views feed into further planning for children. When circumstances change, plans are altered in a timely way, in line with the well-embedded contingency planning, which ensures that plans are always appropriate.

Child protection chairs are used well in decision-making, given their knowledge and understanding of children's cases. They review progress for children subject to child protection plans between formal meetings and routinely challenge practice appropriately when there is drift and unnecessary delay in practice. Their understanding and application of the escalation and dispute resolution process is effective. The child protection monitoring process enables the child protection chairs to actively keep track of cases that require escalation. Most concerns are resolved at informal stage with team managers, without the need to escalate concerns any further.

Children's stories come to life in sensitively written case records and reports. However, the quality and consistency of use and recording of direct work are variable. When direct work is used and recorded, in some cases it is creative and effective but not all children are benefiting from receiving such work. Some children are supported to access advocacy services, which enables them to convey their views, wishes and feelings. However, the use of advocacy services is too variable and advocacy is not being provided to some children who could benefit from this support.

Disabled children are supported well by a dedicated team of social workers who have relevant knowledge and expertise. Social workers are skilled in a variety of communication techniques, including child observation, and are able to present the children's voices clearly to inform decisions. Disabled children and their families are supported with effective individualised support plans, short breaks and access to specialist services as appropriate. Multi-agency partnership work with disabled children is strong, particularly with regard to joint working with adult services, who support disabled parents. This helps keep disabled children safe and supports their parents and carers.

Most children's cases progress into pre-proceedings under the PLO at the right time for the child. Social workers are clear about what they need to do when children enter the PLO process. The letters to parents before proceedings are concisely written and are all delivered in person. They set out the level of concerns and clarify

rights to legal representation and the support available during the PLO process. Expectations of parents and consequences for non-compliance are made clear. This enables parents to understand the changes necessary to avoid moving into court proceedings. Likewise, effective regular management scrutiny and use of the PLO tracker are now embedded, with a clear interface between the tracker and the children's records, which enables effective monitoring. As a result, the PLO intervention is effective in diverting many children away from care proceedings. When there is drift and sustainable change is not achieved, decisive action is taken to issue care proceedings without the need for another PLO episode.

Leaders and managers at Central Bedfordshire are forward-thinking and ambitious and know their service well. They have a coherent approach and a clear line of sight of their improvement journey. Management oversight and supervision are effective in supporting staff, giving direction to practice and in ensuring cases do not drift.

Social workers enjoy working for Central Bedfordshire. They feel well supported by visible and caring managers and senior leaders. They are provided with a range of relevant training and development opportunities which help them become more effective in their roles. Manageable caseloads enable social workers to undertake reflective and effective quality work with children and their parents.

The quality of case audits is variable. Some are evaluative and able to identify strong or weak practice, while others are not. Helped by a recent peer review, leaders have recognised the inconsistency in audit practice and other areas where data quality and performance information can be improved. They are now taking action to address these weaknesses.

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

Yours sincerely

Nhlanganiso Nyathi
His Majesty's Inspector