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Dear Ms Wardell

Focused visit to Surrey local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Surrey local authority children's services on 16 and 17 April 2024. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Anna Gravelle and Rodica Cobarzan.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need or children 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. Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including children's records and discussions with social workers about their work with children. Inspectors also reviewed the local authority's quality assurance and performance management information.

Headline findings

A comprehensive improvement programme has continued to strengthen the quality of support to children in need of help and protection since the last inspection in January 2022. Senior leaders know their services well, as demonstrated by their self-evaluation. They have a deep understanding of the quality of practice and where further improvements are needed. The leader of the council and cabinet members provide effective oversight and have high aspirations for children and their families. They provide support and challenge to senior leaders and have recently increased financial investment to further improve the experiences and progress of children living in Surrey.

Progress for children is evident in the improved quality and timeliness of assessments, the increased timeliness of visits to children and a more consistent application of thresholds. The ongoing implementation of the local authority's chosen model of practice is helping to provide a more balanced and thoughtful response to children and their families.

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

- The quality of letters before proceedings.
- The consistency and quality of direct work with children.

Main findings

Children receive support and protection in accordance with the level of need and risk, and thresholds are applied appropriately. This includes when children's needs change and they 'step up' or 'step down' between child protection planning and child-in-need support.

Children have positive relationships with their social workers because the social workers invest their time in getting to know them. Children are visited frequently and are seen alone, in line with their needs. Social workers demonstrate professional curiosity during visits and make considerable efforts to engage with children, including at school and within their wider families. Some children experience a varied range of resourceful and individualised direct work to help gather their wishes and feelings. However, the quality and depth of this work are not consistent for all children, which means that not all children's lived experiences are fully understood by workers.

Social workers understand the importance of families working together. They ensure that there is early consideration of family networks and family group conferences to consider how children's needs can be best met within their own families. This has a positive impact in terms of engaging families who may be fearful of intervention. It also ensures that children receive early support from those who know and understand their needs, which can help to prevent their needs from escalating.

The quality of assessments for children is strong, and they include the views of parents, children and partner agencies. Children benefit from thorough and timely assessments that help workers to promptly understand children's needs. Social workers ensure that assessments are sensitively written in accordance with the local authority's strengths-based model. This helps workers to establish successful working relationships with parents and children.

Children's plans are mostly comprehensive, with clear actions to help parents to meet children's needs. Plans include contingency arrangements to help parents to understand the next steps and the additional support available should children's needs increase. Children and families benefit from a range of effective family support services to help them in their lives. Child-in-need meetings are well attended by partner agencies, which strengthens information-sharing and helps to progress children's plans.

Strategy meetings are timely and well attended by partner agencies. Records of strategy discussions are comprehensive and include relevant partner agency

information, which improves decision-making and informs safety planning for children. Child protection conference minutes show consistent partner agency attendance and intervention and demonstrate effective understanding and analysis of past concerns and presenting risks. The voices and views of parents and children are evident. Children do not routinely attend their meetings, and leaders have identified this as an area for development. Core group meetings are mostly well attended; participants review children's needs and ensure that plans are progressed to help to reduce risks for children.

Most children whose needs escalate and whose situations are not improving receive timely escalation into pre-proceedings under the Public Law Outline. There is effective oversight of children and families by senior leaders. Social workers make focused efforts to involve absent parents, and separate arrangements are made for them to attend meetings when needed. Overall, the quality of pre-proceedings letters is variable. Letters are not always sensitively written to parents, and they contain formal language or jargon. They do not align with the local authority's strengths-based model of practice.

Disabled children's experiences are well understood by workers, who provide an effective response to their needs and risks. When children's needs increase, support is provided quickly to help to reduce risks as contingency plans are already in place, such as exploring residential care as an option when needed. Social workers are creative in capturing the voices and views of disabled children to understand their experiences, using a range of tools and communication aids to achieve this.

Children on the edge of coming into care benefit from skilled and thoughtful work to ensure that they remain with their families whenever possible. Decisions to accommodate children, usually in times of crisis, are appropriate. A small number of children have not come into care in a planned way, making it harder for them to achieve stability at an early stage or to adapt to their new living arrangements.

Staff turnover has reduced since the last inspection, and while there remain more vacancies and reliance on agency staff than leaders would like within the family resilience and safeguarding part of the service, the workforce is more stable. A thorough recruitment, retention and culture programme is helping leaders to further focus on attracting and growing their own staff. Pay incentives and enhanced worker support are helping to improve staff recruitment and retention.

Further investment by leaders means that most staff have manageable workloads, although some staff within the family safeguarding service still have relatively high workloads. This is because of increased demand and higher vacancy rates in the north of the county, and this impacts on the overall quality of service for some children. Leaders have plans in place to stabilise this part of the service and are actively recruiting. Social workers speak positively about the visibility and communication from senior leaders. They value the focus on continued professional

development and how the variety of training provides them with the skills to do their work.

The quality and frequency of supervision and manager oversight have been strengthened since the last inspection. Social workers value supervision and describe managers who are flexible and unwavering in their support. Supervision records are appropriately detailed and focused on the experiences of children, although there is more work to do to ensure that this is helping to improve experiences for children, particularly in the recording of measurable actions.

Senior leaders have a detailed understanding of practice and have strengthened the quality of practice for children through audit activity. There is an embedded and robust quality assurance framework that is helping to achieve practice improvements through skilled audit work and routine moderation. Leaders use a collaborative approach with staff, which has helped to develop wider organisational understanding of the benefits of this work. Practice learning is disseminated across the workforce to make mostly prompt changes for children. Performance management systems are sophisticated, and leaders have strengthened their use by managers to further enhance practice with children and families.

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