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Dear Mr Whittaker

Focused visit to the Isle of Wight local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to the Isle of Wight local authority children's services on 5 and 6 November 2024. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Steve Bailey and Rachel Griffiths.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children who have a child in need or child protection plan.

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

Headline findings

At the last inspection in November 2023, children's services in the Isle of Wight were judged as good overall but they required improvement in respect of the experiences and progress of children in need of help and protection. Since the last inspection, the local authority's 10-year partnership with Hampshire has ended as planned. The island now has its own director of children's services, supported by a new leadership team. The ending of the partnership has brought challenges as well as opportunities, but significant political and corporate support and investment have enabled an increase in capacity in children's services and provided the opportunity to improve the quality of practice. Leaders have produced an accurate self-assessment and are establishing strong foundations to support further improvement in the quality and impact of social work practice.

Most children with a child in need or child protection plan in the Isle of Wight are being helped to have their needs better met or to be safer. Many weaknesses in specific areas of practice identified at the last inspection have been tackled effectively, although children's plans still vary in quality. Leaders know that there is more to do to ensure that all work with children and families is purposeful and they are clearly focused on driving the necessary improvements for a more effective and impactful quality assurance framework.

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

- The quality and consistency of plans.
- The impact of supervision and audit activity.

Main findings

Children's plans are proportionate and focus on the key needs identified in assessments. Most written plans include the family's own goals and are written in plain English, but some contain proposed actions that are vague and lack timescales. Plans are reviewed regularly by suitably qualified and experienced managers. Review meetings identify whether tasks have been completed and interventions have been provided, but they do not reflect whether the work is achieving its intended impact. Leaders have plans to address this.

Most children subject to plans benefit from a consistent social worker who demonstrates professional curiosity and seeks to explore the underlying causes that have resulted in concern. Most children and families are visited in accordance with their plans and receive a range of well-targeted help and support, although a small number of children with child protection plans do not receive unannounced visits at home.

When risks increase for children with a child in need plan, they receive a prompt and effective response. Most child protection strategy meetings are held in a timely way and routinely include the views of key partner agencies, leading to proportionate and appropriate decision-making. Child protection enquiries are undertaken without delay and visits to children are conducted by social workers who use a range of communication and observation skills to understand children's experiences. The views of parents and relevant professionals are sought to help to inform levels of risk, and social workers consider relevant elements of family history. Children's safety is monitored during these investigations through regular visits, but written safety plans are not always devised with families while enquiries are taking place. When social workers identify that an initial child protection conference may be required, this decision is ratified by managers who have effective oversight of the levels of risk that children may be experiencing. Multi-agency attendance at child protection conferences has improved, and this has strengthened the effectiveness of the planning to help keep children safer.

Well-attended reviews and core groups are used to monitor children's progress, to identify if their needs have changed and to decide if any additional support is required. Reviewing officers provide effective scrutiny and challenge in conferences, and decisions to end child protection plans are underpinned by a clear rationale. Some children are subjects of child in need plans for lengthy periods. Leaders are considering how new systems and realignment of services could help meet children's needs effectively without the need for a statutory plan.

Children experiencing neglect and their families receive a range of intensive responses. Examples include weekly visits by support workers, the creation of daily plans to help parents prioritise tasks, and practical support to clean and declutter, so that children have their immediate needs met for a safer and more comfortable home. However, records do not always include consideration of whether the changes made by parents are sustainable. Awareness and use of the local neglect toolkit is not embedded.

When concerns escalate for children, or if their circumstances are not improving, appropriate decisions are made to strengthen both oversight and support through commencing the pre-proceedings element of the Public Law Outline. Since the previous inspection, leaders have recognised that some pre-proceedings were taking too long before decisions were made about next steps. In response to this, new practice standards have been implemented and tracking systems have been strengthened. There is now more timely progression from the legal gateway meeting to the first pre-proceedings meetings and planned assessments now have clear timescales, but it is too early to see the impact of these changes. When pre-proceedings work is effective, children's experiences improve and families are diverted away from court proceedings.

Disabled children benefit from relationships with social workers who understand their specific communication needs and who have access to specialist training. Children's plans focus on addressing the presenting needs identified in assessment, and are regularly reviewed by social workers, together with professionals from relevant partner agencies. Families receive appropriate support to help them in providing care for their children and this includes access to specialist equipment and adaptations. Work to support children's transition into adulthood starts in good time, with joint work by social workers and adult social care supporting families through the process, helping them to understand their options and entitlements.

Since the last inspection, practice relating to privately fostered children has improved. More children are now being correctly identified as living in private fostering arrangements and training has helped social workers to strengthen assessments, plans and visits. Leaders have a realistic appraisal of where further progress is needed in relation to embedding good practice and standardising record-keeping. Appropriate plans are in place, supported by a network of 'champions' in the workforce, who have received specialist training to support them in their role.

Social workers in the support and protection service receive frequent supervision, which they describe as helpful and reflective. However, the records of these meetings only contain brief updates and they do not track agreed actions from one meeting to the next. Many were seen with standardised actions, with no recognition of the uniqueness of children's needs, circumstances and plans.

Quality assurance and performance management activity are helping leaders and managers to ensure compliance with statutory requirements. However, current audit

activity is not sufficiently effective in critically evaluating the quality of practice. Leaders have already identified that there is more to do to develop quality assurance arrangements, to strengthen the quality of audits and to 'close the loop' in terms of audit outcomes and impact.

The launch of the Isle of Wight children's services directorate has been a clear council priority. Strong political and strategic support for this work has meant that key infrastructure, such as the in-house data and insights team, has been built at pace. A service redesign has recently been undertaken following a thoughtful and realistic assessment of the service's strengths, areas for development and context. Subsequent investment has led to increased management capacity in the support and protection service. Although early days, the workloads of some staff are starting to reduce, with some social workers being able to spend more time with families.

Leaders are visible and approachable and embody their vision of 'making change together' with the workforce. As a result of the co-created approach, social workers are enthusiastic about the changes being made to help them to improve specific parts of their practice, such as focusing on more sensitive and non-blaming language. Staff report that senior leaders are inspiring and that their approach is refreshing. They feel very much engaged in the transformation that is taking place.

All staff who spoke to inspectors were highly complimentary about working in children's social care services on the Isle of Wight. They described a warm and welcoming culture, where they feel cared about, respected and valued. Members of the workforce have been supported to progress in their careers, including some undertaking social work apprenticeships.

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

Yours sincerely

Steve Bailey
His Majesty's Inspector