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Dear Mr Wooster

Focused visit to Somerset local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Somerset local authority children's services on 29 and 30 January 2019. The inspectors were Steve Lowe, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Joy Howick, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Inspectors considered the local authority's arrangements at the first point of contact for children who need help and protection in accordance with the Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services framework (ILACS). Specifically, they considered contacts, referrals and decision-making within the First Response Team, Early Help Hub and area assessment teams, as well as the quality of work completed by the designated officer.

Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers, and meetings with team managers and the designated officer. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.

Overview

Somerset children's services were last inspected by Ofsted in November 2017, when the overall effectiveness of services was judged to require improvement to be good. Since then, the number of permanent team managers and social workers has increased, and caseloads have been reduced to manageable levels. There are still areas of practice that need to be of a better standard, but the senior leadership team has an accurate understanding of the quality of practice in this area of the service. The local authority makes the right decisions for children at the 'front door'.

Thresholds are generally well understood and applied correctly in children's services. From this secure baseline, the local authority is working effectively with partner agencies to embed the understanding across all services.

The quality of service that children receive is too variable across the county. In some areas, children receive a timely and proportionate response that reduces risk and improves their experiences, whereas in other areas the quality of practice remains too variable. While the local authority has taken a range of actions to address practice deficits in these areas, including increased management oversight and capacity, it recognises that there is further work to be done to ensure that all children in Somerset receive an effective service.

In a significant minority of cases seen, it is hard to know what life is really like for the children by reading the social workers' assessments. Some families are also unclear about what needs to change and by when due to the variable quality of plans.

In families where there is domestic abuse, social workers sometimes focus on the non-abusive parent's capacity to protect, and they do not routinely engage with perpetrators in order to address their behaviour and its impact on their children. This sometimes results in short-term improvements for children that are not able to be sustained.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- the extent to which the child's experience of family life informs decision-making
- communication with families about how long assessments are going to take and what social workers hope to achieve
- consistency in the quality of practice with children across the local authority
- engagement with perpetrators in families where there is domestic abuse.

Findings

- Somerset Direct, the local authority's call centre, offers a quick and efficient response to children and families when they are first in need of help or protection. The contact and referral officers are skilled and confident and record concise but appropriate details that assist in timely decision-making. Parental consent is routinely sought as appropriate.
- Managers in the first response team and Early Help Hub have a clear oversight of referrals and a good understanding of thresholds, and they prioritise the children that need most immediate help and protection. Families and referrers receive a clear message about what will happen next. Information is routinely gathered

from partner agencies and informs the decision-making of confident, experienced practitioners in this part of the service.

- Teams of workers with a range of skills, including youth work and counselling, are used to give families a quick and meaningful response in times of crisis. This has led to fewer emergency interventions by children's social care and the police, and, as a result, children who would otherwise have been taken into care have remained safely at home with their families.
- The practitioners in the early help and first response teams offer advice and guidance to partner agencies and there is some progress towards a shared understanding of thresholds and accountability. For example, the number of inappropriate referrals from the police has reduced significantly. However, the local authority acknowledges that there is further work to be done with partner agencies to ensure that families are not signposted to children's social care unnecessarily.
- Appropriate and timely action is taken when children need immediate protection, including outside of normal office hours. The out of hours service responds proportionately to reported concerns. This is supported by good information-sharing between out of hours and daytime services.
- Strategy discussions are convened at the right time for children in almost all cases. Professionals who know the family best are included and contribute their knowledge effectively. This includes the attendance of general practitioners, who play a positive part in discussions about risk. The risks to each child are routinely considered when there is more than one child in the family. Consequently, planning and child protection enquiries are timely and focused.
- Inspectors found that, in a small number of cases, social workers visit families to gather information before a decision is made about whether a strategy discussion is required. The rationale is that concerns raised by other professionals can be answered quickly and that unnecessary investigations by social workers can be avoided. There are some examples of this having a positive impact for families. However, this approach is not consistently applied.
- The designated officer responds competently to concerns raised and offers a response to partner agencies that is both supportive and challenging.
- Social workers who undertake assessments receive clear, concise information from the first response team. The level of risk is clearly identified and there is a clear analysis of what needs to be assessed.
- The quality of assessments is variable, and some do not clearly analyse what life is like for children living in families where there is neglect or violence. In better examples, family history, wider networks, risks and strengths are well used and inform analysis of what needs to change. However, in a significant minority of

cases, it is not easy for the family to know what is expected of them, what support they will receive or how they will know that things have improved for the children.

- When appropriate, assessments are done quickly, and social workers offer helpful support and services from the start of their involvement with children. However, social workers and their managers focus too much on compliance targets for completing assessments and not enough on proportionate timescales that reflect the needs of the child.
- When children are living in families where there is domestic abuse, there is not sufficient engagement by workers with the adults who have committed offences. Often, this is when a male perpetrator is not living with the family due to arrest. Consent is not always gained from the offender and social workers focus too much on the protective capacity of the partner who remains with the children. This results in families requiring further intervention if perpetrators return to the household.
- Social workers and early help practitioners feel well supported and receive supervision that they value. Workers told inspectors that they welcome the increased stability in the workforce, including permanent team managers. There are good opportunities for professional development within the organisation and newly qualified social workers have appropriate caseloads.
- The range of quality assurance tools used by senior leaders is comprehensive and includes independent challenge from other local authorities. To date, these tools have been used largely to improve compliance with statutory timescales. Currently, they are not being fully exploited as a device for embedding improvements in practice. Case audits focus too much on whether processes have been followed rather than the child's experiences.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning your next inspection or visit. This letter will also be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Steve Lowe

Her Majesty's Inspector