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Ms Jo Olsson  
Chief Officer for Children's Services  
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Dear Ms Olsson

### **Focused visit to Devon local authority children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Devon local authority children's services on 1 and 2 May 2019. The inspectors were Steve Lowe, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Emmy Tomsett, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need and those who are subject to a child protection plan. In line with Devon's key service priorities, the focus was on the application of thresholds, the quality of assessments and planning, and the impact that managers have on case direction.

Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers, and meetings with children in need independent reviewing officers (CINIROs) and child protection independent reviewing officers (IROs). They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.

### **Overview**

Senior leaders, including elected members, have appropriately focused their time and energy on creating an environment in which children can receive a better service than when Devon local authority children's services were last inspected by Ofsted in 2015. They have succeeded in stabilising the workforce at all levels and in bringing down social work caseloads to a manageable level. In the areas covered by this visit, they know their strengths and weaknesses well.

A new electronic recording system and a performance management suite have recently been introduced, but are yet to make a positive impact. Managers in the locality areas are continuing to use manual spreadsheets to collate performance information and these are not always accurate or are not used to track performance effectively.

Some inconsistency remains in the application of thresholds across the county. Assessments are of a variable quality and do not routinely inform plans for children. The majority are detailed and updated on time but often lack analysis, professional curiosity and the voice of children and their families. Planning is not clearly linked to reducing identified risks and lacks clarity for families in some cases. Team managers provide support to social workers, but don't challenge enough when the lives of children in need have not improved as expected.

There are some examples of purposeful interventions with families and imaginative work with children that helps them to understand what is happening to them. Conversely, some children are left at risk of being harmed because some social workers lack urgency and direction. In some cases, children are not getting the right help quickly enough and are left in neglectful situations for longer than necessary.

Devon has three main priorities for improving the lives of children who live in the county: timely assessments, accurate planning and consistent supervision. There are weaknesses in all three of these areas that require decisive attention now that the infrastructure is secure.

### **What needs to improve in this area of social work practice**

- the quality of assessments so that these include an analysis of all presenting risks and what they mean for a child
- the focus of children in need and child protection plans so that they link directly to and address the risks identified in assessments
- the level of challenge and scrutiny that managers give to social workers
- the accuracy of performance management data and the consistency of quality assurance audits.

### **Findings**

- Child protection and children in need plans are often too adult-focused, particularly where domestic abuse is a feature. Children in need plans are not always specific, clear or measurable and do not readily enable parents to see what needs to change, and by when, or the consequence of not achieving this. Contingency planning is under-developed.

- Assessments vary in quality. At best, they capture the history and strengths of a family in detail. However, in some cases key risk factors are missed. The majority fall between these two extremes and do not routinely inform plans for children. Comprehensive assessments that are completed in the initial response teams are of a better quality. When these are updated for reviews, they are often as a description of the current picture in a family. The opportunity to consider what has changed for children and to re-evaluate risks is missed in these cases.
- In general, children are seen and seen alone by social workers. In a small number of cases, children are not seen at a frequency that reflects the risks they face. As a result, they are left in situations where they are at risk of harm. When children become subject to a child protection plan, it is often the case that they are not visited for another four weeks. This delays the start of meaningful work with the family and results in no discernible change in children's lives for several weeks after social workers have concluded that they are at risk of harm.
- Social workers working with children in need and those children who are subject to a child protection plan have manageable caseloads across all the locality areas in Devon. They feel well supported, and report that they now have the capacity to do purposeful social work with children. However, managers support social workers rather than challenge them and this lack of scrutiny results in visits without purpose and children not being seen in proportion to identified risk.
- CINIROs have started to make an impact on practice by working alongside social workers and managers. The initiative is a positive one and there are tangible improvements in assessment and planning where the CINIROs have been involved.
- At the point where statutory intervention is no longer necessary, families are too frequently left for several months before a replacement service is put in place. Social workers lack confidence in identifying exactly what is needed in the wider children's service and securing that service quickly.
- Child protection IROs routinely contact families when social workers request an initial child protection conference, and scrutinise the assessment made during child protection investigations. This results in fewer children and families being subjected to statutory intervention. When children do need a child protection plan, the IROs maintain contact with parents throughout the duration of the plan, which offers continuity to parents that they value.
- The frequency of supervision is improving but is poorly recorded, and there are still significant gaps for some workers. Social workers report that support on a day-to-day basis is better now that they have permanent managers. Formal supervision lacks challenge, urgency and reflection. In some cases, children in need are left in neglectful situations for longer than necessary as social workers are not challenged to try something different.

- Targeted and themed case audits have increased over the last 12 months, and address the correct priority areas within each locality, for example teenagers coming into care and children in need cases that have been closed. The results of these give managers a rich vein of information that is helping to target improvements. In general terms, however, audits are overly optimistic. The lack of consistent training for people undertaking audits means that senior leaders cannot be assured that practice is being evaluated consistently.
- The performance management tool that was introduced last year was taken offline while the local authority moved to a new electronic recording system. This was the case for some three months, and it has only very recently been reinstated. In the interim, managers have been using manual spreadsheets. These are not always accurate, and performance in some areas has suffered accordingly.
- Thresholds are largely well understood, but this is not consistent across the locality areas. In some cases, children are moved at a time of crisis because escalating risks have not been addressed.
- Early help practitioners now sit alongside social work teams. Consequently, social workers have a growing understanding of what wider support is available to families. However, in some cases seen, children in need waited several months before receiving these services because planning and management oversight lack urgency.
- Advocacy and family group conferences are offered routinely for children in need and those on a child protection plan, and both make a positive difference to children's lives.
- When children are at a significant risk of harm and families are not making the changes required of them, legal services and the public law outline are used in a timely way. The letters to parents before proceedings are clear and concise.

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

Yours sincerely

Steve Lowe  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**