

Date of Meeting: 10th Dec 2019

Portfolio Holder: Cllr A Parry, Children, Education and Early Help

Local Member(s): All Councillors

Executive Director: Sarah Parker, Executive Director of People - Children

Executive Summary:

Ofsted undertook a Focused Visit of the council's children in need and child protection service on 1st and 2nd of October 2019. This report provides an overview of the key findings, including areas of strength and areas for development. It describes the actions that has been taken and the planned next steps to continue to improve the quality of children's services practice.

Equalities Impact Assessment: n/a

Budget: n/a

Risk Assessment:

Having considered the risks associated with this decision, the level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: LOW

Residual Risk: LOW

Climate implications: n/a

Other Implications: n/a

Delivery of quality children's service is essential to ensuring that children and young people are safeguarded.

Recommendation:

The Cabinet notes the report on the ILACS Focused Visit, the progress made and the next steps for the council in improving children's services.

Reason for Recommendation:

To formally notify cabinet of the outcome of the inspection, together with the Council's response to the findings of the visit.

Appendices:

Appendix1: Letter from Ofsted.

Background Papers:

Ofsted Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services Framework and Guidance:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inspecting-local-authority-childrens-services-from-2018>

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1. Introduction

1.1. Ofsted undertook a Focused Visit of the council's children in need and child protection service on 1st and 2nd of October 2019. This report provides an overview of the key findings, which was published on the 24th October 2019.

2. Background

2.1. The Inspections of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) framework evaluates the effectiveness of services; arrangements to help and protect children; the experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers and the effectiveness of leaders and managers.

2.2. The ILACS framework includes several different activities including:

- (a) An annual engagement meeting between Ofsted regional representatives and council's children's services senior leadership team to review a self-evaluation of practice and inform the type of inspection activity that will be undertaken in the future;
- (b) Focused visits that look at a specific area of children's services such as a particular service or a particular group of children, resulting in the publication of a letter outlining strengths and areas for improvement;
- (c) Standard and short inspections which result in a judgement on a four-point scale: Inadequate, Requires Improvement to be good; Good or Outstanding.

2.3. A link to further information on the ILACS Inspection Framework is provided as a background paper to this report.

3. Scope of the Focused Visit

3.1. The focused visit focused on Dorset's arrangements for children in need and those subject to a child protection plan. This included child protection enquiries and plans, children in need assessments, decisions to take children into care and step up from and step down to early help.

3.2. The visit also evaluated the effectiveness of performance management, management oversight, supervision, quality assurance and the workforce development arrangements for social workers.

4. Method

4.1. In line with guidance, Ofsted provided 5 days' notice before arriving on site and during that time the council provided a list of evidence for the inspectors to review before they arrived. This included strategy documents and plans, anonymised child level information and details of any audits that have been undertaken in the last 6 months.

- 4.2. From this, inspectors identified six cases for a detailed review and the council provided further detailed information on these cases.
- 4.3. The Inspection team consisted of two inspectors from Ofsted along with an observer from the Department for Education. On the second day of the inspection a third inspector came to provide quality assurance of the visit.
- 4.4. Inspectors look at a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers, performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.
- 4.5. They visited our social work teams in their offices in Dorchester and Ferndown and spent most of their time on-site with social workers talking about the children they are working with to understand the quality of social work practice and management oversight.
- 4.6. The final report was published on 24th October 2019 and is provided as an appendix to this report with key findings summarised below.

5. Key Findings

- 5.1. Inspectors recognised that changes in the children's services senior leadership team and local government reorganisation have increased the pace of improvement and children are now benefiting from better help and protection than seen in previous inspections of Dorset County Council Children's Services undertaken in 2016 and 2018.
- 5.2. However, there is more to do as there is still too much variability in some important practice areas such as assessment and planning. Inspectors acknowledged that the children's services leadership team understands what needs to improve and have a programme in place to address this which is ambitious, but thoughtful and prioritised important areas such as early help, and a new front door.
- 5.3. The investment made in training the workforce in relationship and strengths based social work practice through the Department for Education funded Innovation Programme is having an impact and social workers are able to talk confidently about the approach and the impact of this on children's lives.
- 5.4. The planned introduction of a new approach to quality assurance was welcomed as the one being used when the inspectors arrived was not sufficient to provide assurance of the quality of practice or experience of children.
- 5.5. Inspectors identified some specific areas of improvement, which were:
 - (a) Improving the quality of chronologies. These are important documents that capture all the major changes and significant events in a child's life, in date order. This is an important tool to help social workers and others to

understand what has happened in the child or family's lives so they can make good plans for the future.

- (b) Improving the effectiveness of management oversight, including by chairs of child protection conferences. This is important to ensure that plans for children progress and improve their situations in the right timeframe.
- (c) Improving how cases are audited to provide more focus on the experiences of children.

6. Next Steps

- 6.1. The areas for improvement identified during the focused visit have been prioritised within the directorate's Quality Improvement Plan and the senior leadership team is overseeing progress.
- 6.2. Our revised Quality Assurance Framework is being implemented and a new auditing process commenced this month, with a greater focus on the experiences of children.
- 6.3. We have redesigned our approach to chronologies and mandatory training has been scheduled for all our front-line practitioners.
- 6.4. A series of staff briefings and workshops are taking place with practitioners and managers focusing on the areas of practice that need to improve.
- 6.5. We are working on our Blueprint for Change with staff which seeks to remove barriers to undertaking direct work with children and families, such as travel time by locating social workers in localities as well as increasing capacity for workforce development and quality assurance.

7. Recommendations

- 7.1. Cabinet are asked to note the report on the ILACS Focused Visit, the progress made and the next steps for the council in improving children's services.