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24 October 2019

Ms Sarah Parker
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Dear Ms Parker

Focused visit to Dorset children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Dorset children's services on 1 and 2 October 2019. The inspectors were Diane Partridge and Marcie Taylor, Her Majesty's Inspectors.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need and those subject to a child protection plan. Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers, local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.

Overview

Since the joint area inspection (JTAI) in 2018, changes in the senior leadership team and local government re-organisation have significantly impacted on the pace of improvement in children's services. Many areas of improvement identified in the single inspection in 2016 had not improved at the point of the JTAI in 2018. Children are now benefiting from much better help and protection. However, the variability in key practice areas, such as assessment and planning, aligned with some inconsistency in the application of threshold at key decision-making points, means that not all children receive a consistently good service.

The new executive director of children's services and her senior team recognise that the quality of practice remains too variable. They have a clear understanding of what needs to improve. They have embarked on a whole system transformation programme. Their ambitious approach is thoughtful, with an initial focus on stabilising the workforce. Work to reconfigure early help and 'front door' services has

also been prioritised so that children receive the right level of help and support at the right time. The investment and training in relationship-based social work practice has reinvigorated the workforce. Social workers now talk confidently about their approach and can demonstrate the difference that this makes to children's lives.

Quality assurance systems are in place, but these do not provide senior leaders with a realistic understanding of the quality of practice or help them to understand the experience of children. Audits are overly focused on processes, with insufficient consideration of the impact of practice on children's situations. Senior leaders have recognised this, and a new quality assurance framework is due to be launched imminently.

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

- The quality of chronologies, so that they help social workers to better understand the impact of children's histories and what this means for their plans in the future.
- The effectiveness of management oversight, including by child protection conference chairs, so that plans progress and improve children's situations within a timescale that is right for them.
- Audits, so that greater focus is given to the experience of children.

Findings

- Children in need of help and protection are increasingly benefiting from stronger and more consistent relationships with their social workers. Reinvigorated relationship and strength-based approaches mean that parents better understand the changes they need to make and are supported to make these. However, child protection conferences do not consistently make the right decision about when to start, continue or cease child protection plans, which means that some children are not getting the help or protection they need quickly enough or for long enough.
- Chronologies are mostly system generated and therefore do not help social workers and managers to understand children's histories and key events in their lives.
- Most assessments detail sufficiently children's needs and presenting risk, with the needs of brothers and sisters differentiated. However, assessments do vary in quality and are not consistently informed by family history. The use of research to inform analysis in assessments is a feature in a small number of children's records. Parenting assessments completed by social workers are a strength. They are comprehensive documents that help to inform what needs to happen to improve children's situations. They fully consider history and provide a detailed analysis of how children's experiences impact on their health and development.

- Most children are seen in line with their plan, and, at times, more frequently, such as during school holidays or at times of increased family difficulties. Children are seen at home, at school and in the community so that social workers can gather their views where they feel most comfortable. However, this is not the experience of all children. The local authority's own performance information reports that 41% of children subject to child protection plans are not visited within timescales. Senior leaders are aware of this and are acting to ensure that children are seen, as well as to improve the quality of recording when children have been seen.
- Some children benefit from creative and impactful direct work, which helps them to make sense of their experiences. However, purposeful direct work is not routinely undertaken with all children, which means that their views do not clearly inform plans and decisions.
- Effective and regular use of advocates helps children to express their views about the help they receive. When it is in their best interests, children are well supported to attend child protection conferences or to have their views shared by advocates.
- The quality of children in need and child protection plans is variable. In the best examples seen, plans are explicit about what needs to happen and what help and support will be provided to children and their families. Initial plans from conferences are too brief, simplistic and global for parents to fully understand what needs to happen. Consequently, children do not always receive the right help and support when they need it. The more detailed plans developed in core groups are more specific and measurable.
- Social workers make regular and effective use of family group conferences to engage members of the extended family and wider networks in children's plans. This supports families and helps them to sustain progress when statutory social work support is no longer required.
- Core groups and reviews take place regularly. They are well attended by multi-agency partners, who engage effectively to provide help and support to children and their families. For most children, this means that their situation improves. More recently, swifter action, when risks increase, results in timely and appropriate use of pre-proceedings processes to effect positive change for children. The children entering care most recently have done so at a time that is right for them. At the point that statutory intervention ceases, plans are increasingly being agreed with multi-agency partners for ongoing help and support to maintain improved situations for children.
- In the last four months, supervision has started to take place regularly and in line with expectations. It is not yet sufficiently reflective or challenging, nor is it effective in ensuring progression of children's plans. This means that not all children's circumstances improve within a timescale that is right for them.

- Senior leaders use a range of management information and audit findings to help them to understand the quality of practice. Management information helps them to identify strengths and areas for practice improvement. However, audits are overly focused on process and compliance, rather than the experience of the child. This means that senior leaders are not sufficiently alert to the impact of practice on children's experiences and whether a positive difference is being made to their lives.

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

Yours sincerely

Diane Partridge
Her Majesty's Inspector