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Ms Lisa Arthey
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Dear Lisa

Monitoring visit to Swindon children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Swindon children's services on 21 and 22 May 2024. This was the second monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in July 2023. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Christine Kennet and Nick Bennison.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the following areas of concern identified at the last inspection:

- Child in need and child protection planning, including planning for disabled children.
- Children who step down from child in need to early help services.
- Children within the pre-proceedings phase of the public law outline.

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

Headline findings

The local authority has continued to make positive and steady progress since the last monitoring visit, which took place in February 2024. Progress has been made in the areas of practice reviewed at this visit, since the ILACS inspection in July 2023. The family safeguarding model has become more embedded, and, adult services workers have been recruited and trained in the model. This enables a joint approach, working alongside children's social workers and practitioners to address safeguarding risks in child in need and child protection planning. Some inconsistencies remain in

the quality of social work practice, but increased management oversight is starting to have some impact on planning for children. The senior leadership team has a clear understanding of where improvement is needed and what needs to change. Leaders are aware of the need to implement change at a pace quickly enough to make improvements for children and which allows such changes to become embedded in practice allowing the workforce to positively engage in such a transformation.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Most children in need of help and protection have social workers who understand their needs and experiences. Social workers establish relationships with children and parents, supporting children to remain safely with their parents, or considering other options if this is not possible. Social workers develop a clear understanding of children's family support networks and how they may offer support to the children.

There is still variability in practice for a minority of children. Some recordings of visits to children and their families are comprehensive, and visits are at a frequency that meets children's needs. For other children, visits are less frequent, and records do not always reflect the risks to children records are not reflective of children's experiences. The recording of visits does not always reflect the work being undertaken, which leads to difficulties in gaining a clear overview of the progress that some families are making.

A minority of children have experienced drift and delay in decision-making. This has meant that they have lived in circumstances for too long that are not improving quickly enough. Equally, for those children experiencing domestic abuse, there is an over optimism as to whether parents have made significant change to their behaviours which have previously negatively impacted on their children.

The embedding of adult service workers specialising in working with adults with poor mental health, substance misuse issues or where there is domestic abuse has strengthened the support that families receive in the family safeguarding service. This means that, where parenting capacity is affected by these issues, parents receive timely assessments and input from specialist workers. Increasingly, planning for most children is well-co-ordinated through group supervision. This supervision enables a thorough understanding of the child's experiences within the family from a multi-agency perspective and leads to plans that address identified areas of risk and need.

The quality of multi-agency working for children on child in need plans is mixed. Children do not always have timely child in need meetings which involve the appropriate professionals, review and develop the plan and set clear actions and timescales. In weaker examples, children do not experience timely and effective support, and although they are making some progress, their plans are not robustly reviewed or implemented in a timely manner.

Most children are appropriately 'stepped down' from statutory social care provision to wider, targeted and universal support. The recent, multi-agency, child in need

panel is beginning to make a positive impact on ensuring that decisions to support step-down processes are timely and well-co-ordinated. It is also reviewing and providing scrutiny to child in need plans that have been in place for longer than nine months. This is helping to ensure that plans are appropriately reviewed and children are the subject of planning for no longer than they need be or receiving the most appropriate intervention when risks escalate.

Some children on child protection plans, who have experienced cumulative harm, do not have plans that are robust enough to fully address risks within the family. This results in plans being repeated and children left experiencing harm for too long. In stronger planning, particularly for unborn babies, child protection assessment and planning result in clearer actions and timely management of risk.

Social workers in the children with disability teams are sensitive in gaining an understanding of the voice of the child. Their assessments review the whole range of children's holistic needs. This leads to comprehensive plans that support children to remain with their family when it is safe for them to do so.

Children who are subject to the pre-proceedings phase of the public law outline receive greater management oversight of their progress. However, despite increased review, some children are subject to pre-proceedings for too long. In response, the local authority has provided additional training to inform managers and workers about expectations relating to children who are the subject of such planning though it is too soon to comment on its effectiveness. The local authority is also positively focusing on the language and content of letters to parents to ensure that they are able to fully engage and understand the pre-proceedings process.

Child in need and child protection plans are increasingly reviewed by appropriate managers. There is greater management oversight evident both at key decision points and on plans and conference reports. This is beginning to lead to an increasing number of children experiencing support from the local authority that meets their needs and reduces risks.

Senior leaders are determined to improve services for vulnerable children in Swindon. There is positive engagement by both political and corporate leaders in the improvement journey. This is evident in the active engagement of leaders in the improvement board and in the current monitoring arrangements. The sector led improvement partners have now been agreed by the Department for Education, to support further progress.

Senior leaders in children's services know their service well, and they have invited external scrutiny to develop their understanding further. An increasing range of feedback and quality assurance enables leaders to gain a full and accurate understanding of their service. There are plans to strengthen audits by seeking the views of children and parents and involving practitioners in the audit process to strengthen their knowledge and ensure that this a reflective learning process.

In child in need and child protection planning, a number of improvements are beginning to have a positive impact on the experiences and progress of children,

including the embedding of the chosen model of practice. Social workers and adult workers are positive about the strengthening collaboration between them when assessing parental difficulties which impact on parents' capacity to care safely for their children. Their combined assessment and analysis of risk is supporting clearer views on parental capacity to change and bringing new perspectives to relationship building and work to effect change for children. Pockets of poorer practice are still clearly evident, but overall, inspectors have seen positive change in culture and thinking. This is particularly important for some of the longer term child in need and child protection planning, where cumulative harm through long-term neglect and or domestic abuse has left children in adverse circumstances for too long. While an improving picture for some children, others are the subject of repeat planning without decisive intervention being undertaken to protect them.

The family safeguarding service, developed since the ILACS inspection in 2023, is beginning to have a positive impact. The service is expected to have all permanent team managers in place by June 2024. The impact of permanent managers is already visible, with staff having a greater sense of consistent support and review of their work and, as a consequence, children are experiencing an improving service. Although there are still areas for development, there is a much greater focus by workers in the service on understanding the children they work with and their wider family networks.

A workforce development plan which focuses on the recruitment and retention of social workers is already having some impact. There is an increasing number of permanent social workers, leading to a greater sense of stability for children and their families. For a few workers, caseloads are higher than the local authority would normally expect, which, if not addressed, may negatively impact on both future workforce stability and on the quality of the services that children receive.

The training offer to both managers and workers, including specialist workers, has widened and focused on ensuring that staff within this service area are well-supported including appropriate professional challenge in their roles. The majority of staff are trained in the family safeguarding model and continued training is being rolled out for early help workers and partners.

There is a greater positivity being created by the visibility and approachability of the senior leadership team and more joined up work within the council. This is supported by the embedding of the new model of practice and more stability in the senior leadership team, service managers and team managers in this part of the service.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Christine Kennet
His Majesty's Inspector