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Dear Mr Crocker

Focused visit of Isle of Wight children's services (pilot)

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Isle of Wight children's services on 1 August 2017. Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) Linda Steele and Andy Whippy undertook the visit. The quality assurance manager was Janet Fraser, Senior HMI.

On this focused visit, inspectors examined the local authority's arrangements for child in need and child protection, specifically:

- The application of thresholds for children in need and child protection, particularly in respect of the effectiveness of practice in response to increasing or reducing risk.
- The effectiveness of assessment and planning for children in need of help and protection.
- The quality of management oversight, challenge and staff supervision in the provision of services for children in need of help and protection.

A range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers and parents and carers, and meetings with child protection chairs, informed inspectors' findings. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.

Overview

- When the circumstances of children who need help or protection change, social workers take appropriate action and make good decisions to ensure that the children receive the right level of support. Management oversight of this work with children is strong. Effective systems are in place to ensure

that these actions and decisions are reviewed and, when necessary, challenged.

- Social workers know the children they work with well, provide good support and help them to stay safe. Social workers recognise when risks to children increase or reduce, and take the right steps to respond to this.
- Senior leaders have worked resolutely to implement systemic change to services for children in need of help and protection. In doing this they have created a healthy environment of high support and high challenge in which social workers are able to grow in skill and confidence. Senior leaders know their services well and maintain a strong focus on securing continuous improvement.

Areas of strength

- Children and their families receive the right help at the right time. Social workers and their managers apply thresholds for statutory intervention proportionately. Support and intervention is appropriately increased, or reduced, in response to children's changing needs.
- Strategy discussions and meetings are timely and include information from relevant partners that is used effectively to inform decisions about how to proceed. Child protection enquires are comprehensive and are overseen meticulously by managers. Child protection conferences are timely, well attended and good decisions are made for children during these conferences.
- Children's case records and chronologies are up to date and reflect managerial decision-making and oversight.
- Social workers visit children regularly at home. They also visit children at venues outside of the family home that provide safe spaces for children to express their thoughts and feelings.
- Social workers show a good understanding of the children they work with. They consistently seek the views of children and carry out individual work with them. However, it is not always clear in case records, assessments and plans what life is truly like for children.
- The disabled children's team ensure that disabled children and their families receive the right help at the right time. Social workers engage well with children, families and relevant professionals to ensure that children receive the help and protection needed to safeguard their welfare.
- Family intervention workers specialising in domestic abuse, substance misuse and mental health work with adults in families alongside children's social workers. This has improved levels of engagement with families, the quality of direct work, and decision making about the level of need. This is safely reducing risks and improving outcomes for some children.

- Knowledgeable, confident and accessible managers support staff well to make decisions about how best to support and protect children. Social workers have access to a wide range of good training opportunities. Newly qualified social workers have protected caseloads and they spoke highly of the support they receive.
- Management oversight of children's individual cases is strong, with the rationale for the decisions explained in case records. When work is not of an acceptable standard, managers routinely return it to social workers to review before authorisation. Managers have access to detailed, good quality performance management information, which supports them in managing their teams effectively. This enables managers to identify areas for improvement at an early stage and take timely steps to address these.
- Senior leaders promote a culture of continuous improvement, supported by well-motivated staff whose morale is high. Staff vacancies and the use of agency workers are low.
- Social workers' caseloads are manageable and scrutinised on a weekly basis by service managers. The local authority has invested in employing personal assistants for social workers, which has increased the time that social workers have available to spend with families.
- The local authority is proactive in gathering feedback from children and their families to learn first-hand of their experiences of services. The 'have your say' week offers activities and participatory opportunities for children involved in all aspects of children services. An example of a response to children's feedback is the development of guides to children's services and to child protection conferences.

Areas for improvement

- The majority of assessments and plans are of satisfactory quality; they explore risks and protective factors and consider family history and information from other agencies. Nevertheless, the overall analysis within assessments is variable and contributes to weaknesses in decision making and care planning for some children.
- The quality of children in need and child protection plans is variable. Some are overly long and not written in a way that children and families are able to understand. Plans lack clear timescales and do not include contingencies to ensure that families understand what will happen if things do not improve or situations deteriorate.
- Records of visits to children are detailed and often of good quality, although some would benefit from a clearer focus on monitoring the objectives of the child's plan.
- Understandably and quite rightly, quality assurance activity has been focused on ensuring compliance with processes. Senior managers recognise

that they now need to shift this emphasis and increase the focus on the quality of practice, and the impact of this on improving children's circumstances.

- The quality of audits is not yet consistently good. Some managers are not sufficiently self-critical and quarterly quality assurance reports lack robust analysis. Both of these factors dilute the effectiveness of audits in improving practice and senior managers recognise this. A new quality assurance framework is due to be launched in September 2017. Senior managers believe that this will improve the effectiveness of the quality assurance process.
- Evidence of the supervision of some staff is not yet sufficient to demonstrate the critical thinking and reflection needed to help social workers perform well in their work with children. For a small number of social workers, supervision is not regular enough.

Yours sincerely

Linda Steele

Her Majesty's Inspector