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Ofsted Focused Inspection of Swindon Children's Services

This is a special issue of the SSP newsletter to provide a more detailed overview of the Ofsted Inspection conducted between 8th to 10th December 2020 in Swindon. It also serves to recognise the improvements Children's Social Care have made and to celebrate the significant contribution which partners have played to this favourable outcome for the children in Swindon. To access the report [click here](#)

Overview of the inspection process

Ofsted Focused Visits are carried out to evaluate an aspect of a service, a theme or the experiences of a cohort of children. They are undertaken in-between standard and short ILACS inspections. The focused visits are not graded, but their findings could influence the frequency of further inspections, and a poor outcome would negatively impact on the Council's reputation. Ofsted introduced a new regime of visits to evaluate and provide assurance that vulnerable children are getting the help, care and protection that they need, amid concerns that some may have fallen out of sight during the COVID-19 pandemic. This visit looked at the quality and impact of key decision-making across help and protection, children in care and care leavers' services, together with the impact of leadership on service development.

Some information was sent to Ofsted in advance of the visit, such as child level data, performance reports, Self-Assessment, examples of quality assurance activity undertaken and relevant policy documents.

Further evidence was gathered over 3 days by 5 of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI), which included meetings with Social Workers and reviewing case records. There were also meetings with managers in the MASH team; Service Managers, Child Exploitation and Missing lead officers; Placement Commissioners; Quality Assurance leads; the Swindon Children in Care Council and a group of Care Leavers. The Education HMI met with the Virtual School Head and phase leads; Service Managers responsible for education, employment and training for Care Leavers; Designated Teachers from a number of schools; Attendance and Children Missing Education and Elective Home Education leads; Head Teachers and a group of foster carers.

Ofsted's Findings

Ofsted were assured by their visit to Swindon and made some positive comments. These are included in their overview statements.

"The local authority has maintained the effectiveness of its front door services, despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, the introduction of a new electronic casework system and a rise in referrals over the recent weeks. Decision-making is timely and appropriate actions are taken to protect vulnerable children. Management oversight and the rationale for decision-making is well recorded. Thresholds for statutory action are appropriately applied, with managers and social workers demonstrating a clear understanding of risk."

They describe how effective leadership across the whole children's services system has ensured that children who are at risk, or have additional needs, have been identified, supported, protected and have their needs met, including their learning needs.

Ofsted note that social work practice in Swindon *"has continued to improve through an embedded quality assurance process well led by the director of children's services."*

Ofsted also commented favourably on:

- Partnership working, early intervention, and information sharing.
- Application of thresholds and decision-making.
- Effectively meeting the physical and mental health needs of children and young people.
- Social workers and other staff have continued to visit families in their homes, and when necessary intervened to improve the lives of children.
- Identifying and responding appropriately when children are on the edge of care and may require a legal process, including removal from harmful situations.
- Social Workers knowing children well and developing good relationships with them
- Partnerships with other agencies have been maintained and enhanced both at a strategic level through effective joint working across the partnership group in response to the COVID 19 pandemic and on the ground with good attendance at child protection conferences and planning meetings for children.
- Early help processes enable many children to get help at an early opportunity. If risk escalates children's cases are escalated to statutory services in a timely way.
- Child protection strategy meetings in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) are timely with appropriate attendance from partners. There is effective information sharing and clear written minutes and action points for social workers to follow.
- Child protection thresholds and decisions are appropriate and informed by identification of risk including an understanding of neglect. Child protection enquiries appropriately assess risks and engage views of professionals and families.
- Child protection conferences are timely and plans clearly identify risks and vulnerabilities for children. Actions arising from plans are focused on enhancing safety planning. As a result, plans show a positive impact on reducing risk. There is an appreciation of cumulative harm and a strong understanding of neglect for older children as well as younger children. Core groups and review meetings are held virtually but are timely and benefit from good engagement of professionals which supports children's circumstances to improve.
- Children with children in need (CIN) plans are well supported and where risks escalate there is appropriate consideration of what further steps including child protection processes are required. In some cases however successive lockdowns have further hampered effective engagement with families delaying progress.
- There is an appropriate focus on children's health needs including mental health and emotional wellbeing. A range of support services, including Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) have continued to provide support to children during the pandemic. When services were unable to provide a full service, the local authority sought and obtained alternative providers.
- The number of children electively home educated (EHE) has increased significantly over the course of the pandemic and is approximately 60% higher than a year ago. While the local authority has increased staffing to ensure these parents and children have been contacted and offered a meeting within three weeks, capacity to meet rising numbers has been stretched.
- Numbers of children missing from education have reduced, but reviews of children who have been missing from education could not be quickly located and are only reviewed at six-month intervals. This does not ensure that the local authority has sufficiently up to date information on these children.
- Improved care placement sufficiency, including more children placed close to Swindon
- The effectiveness of the Virtual School and how they have escalated especially where out of Borough CLA with an EHCP.

Identified areas for development and improvement

The timeliness of provision of a school place for children with an EHCP. For a small number of children in care with an EHCP who are placed out of borough it has taken too long to secure them a school place.

Response to this finding: It can be harder to secure education provision for Swindon children who are in a care placement in another Local Authority, but as Ofsted themselves point out, the Virtual School have escalated this when education provision has not been made available in the other Local Authority. The Virtual School Head Teacher will continue to use all available options to escalate when education providers are not meeting priority needs in their area.

The frequency of reviews of children who are missing education. Numbers of children missing from education have reduced but reviews of children who have been missing from education and could not be quickly located are only reviewed at six monthly intervals. This does not ensure that the local authority has sufficiently up to date information on these children.

Response to this finding: Action has already been taken to review children missing from education more frequently and increased capacity in the team.

Conclusions

The feedback and findings provide assurance that despite some of the additional challenges presented by the pandemic, children and young people have continued to be protected and supported in Swindon, and service improvements have progressed. There have been 17 letters published by Ofsted so far in relation to these Focused Visits. Swindon's letter compares very favourably to the other Local Authorities that have been subject to these visits. The areas for improvement identified by Ofsted were already known by officers, and actions have been taken to address areas for development.