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Hilary Brooks
Director of Children's Services
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Dear Ms Brooks

Focused visit to St Helens children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to St Helens children's services on 24 and 25 April 2024. His Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Gareth Dakin and Alison Smale.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need and those subject to a protection plan.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. This visit considered a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers and managers, children's case records and the local authority's quality assurance arrangements.

Headline findings

Since the last ILACS inspection in July 2023, when services were judged to be good overall, the senior leadership team, supported by the lead member and the wider council, has continued to develop and improve outcomes for the children and families of St Helens. The areas highlighted for improvement at the inspection have been advanced by senior leaders and consistent development is being made in a timely way that supports improvements in outcomes for children.

Services for children and families remain a high priority across the council and aspirational plans are in place to improve services further. The needs of children and families subject to children in need or protection planning are understood.

Main findings

Children subject to child in need or child protection planning in St Helens receive a consistent and effective service. Children are seen regularly by skilled and committed social workers who know the importance of showing patience, kindness and

understanding in engaging and building relationships with those with whom they work.

Social workers know their children and families well and understand the complexities of social work in St Helens. They work positively with children and their families to support them so they can make positive changes in their lives. There is a strong understanding of the needs of children in St Helens, and where there are risks, these are recognised and addressed.

In stronger examples of direct work, there was evidence of positive and impactful direct work with children that influenced and informed decision-making. Nevertheless, for a small number of children, it was not clear how their voice had been listened to and what work had been undertaken with them to understand their circumstances and to affect their outcomes. Leaders are aware of this and are taking action to address this variation.

Most assessments of children and families are comprehensive, clear and balanced. They consider the holistic needs of a family's circumstances and recognise the impact of trauma and lived experience. Children's plans are detailed and appropriately focused on the needs and risks present in their lives. Most child in need and child protection plans clearly set out what help is needed, by who, why and when.

Professionals working with the child and their family, through child protection core groups and child in need meetings, ensure that multi-agency children's plans are reviewed and progressed. Issues such as escalating risk for children and drift and delay are highlighted and addressed at the earliest opportunity and appropriate action taken. This supports effective decision-making and planning for children.

The management oversight of frontline practice is strong. Statutory interventions for children and families are appropriately escalated and de-escalated in a timely way. Managers are supported by clear systems and processes, and they collaborate with social workers to ensure that informed and timely decisions are made for children.

Supervision is held regularly for most social workers. Records of supervision evidence clear oversight of social workers' work with children. Most records show that supervision is reflective and issues are thoroughly explored.

Social workers and managers in St Helens benefit from a range of focused assurance and decision-making meetings that provide oversight at key decision points for children. This ensures that most children receive the right level of help and protection at the right time, and the risk of drift and delay for children is reduced.

Where children are subject to child protection planning repeatedly or for extended periods of time, there are active review mechanisms to consider the effectiveness of interventions and to re-evaluate thresholds of service. This ensures that interventions

can be changed in line with need and reduces the risk of drift and delay for children and their families.

Decision-making in legal gateway meetings is robust and brings proportionate challenge and curiosity. Letters before proceedings and pre-proceedings meetings clearly set out the seriousness of concerns. They set clear and timebound actions and ensure that families understand the implications of this level of intervention.

The oversight of children subject to the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline is strong. When children are subject to pre-proceedings, there are effective structures that track and monitor progress, along with robust oversight from senior leaders and managers. This ensures that cases within pre-proceedings progress in a timely way.

When appropriate, pre-proceedings are extended to support the completion of relevant actions in a time-limited way. Where pre-proceedings progress, decision-making is informed by clear analysis and rationale. This is reflected in subsequent planning for children.

Neglect remains a key priority in St Helens and improvements from the last inspection are evident. Strengthened social work resources are supporting staff to be more consistent and effective in their interventions with children and families.

The use of family group conferencing to engage with children's wider extended family and networks is a real strength in St Helens. The service is used effectively by social workers. This supports and strengthens planning for children.

Senior leaders know their services well. Comprehensive and targeted plans help them to track improvement and consider emerging needs. Senior managers use well-developed systems to provide oversight at crucial decision points in children's lives. This scrutiny ensures that there is a direct line of sight of social work practice and provides assurances that children's plans and interventions are progressed appropriately.

Senior leaders have developed a clear quality assurance framework. This supports them to understand social work practice and children's experiences. Audits are well structured and comprehensive and are supported by a clear audit tool. In most cases, audits are undertaken collaboratively with social workers and there are clear systems to evidence impact. Audits do not routinely involve children and families directly. Leaders are aware of this and are reviewing their quality assurance processes to strengthen this area.

Strong corporate support has enabled strategies to be implemented that attract and retain social workers. This is improving workforce stability in St Helens and children and families are having fewer unplanned changes of social worker as a result. The

broader workforce strategy is responsive to staffing needs and is having a positive impact on sufficiency, well-being in the workforce and practice development.

Senior leaders and managers take care with the language they use, in a way that is sensitive and considered. They are developing a culture of practice that is understood by the workforce and is reflected in their work with children and families.

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

Yours sincerely

Gareth Dakin
His Majesty's Inspector