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Julie Moss  
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Dear Ms Moss

### **Focused visit to Knowsley children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Knowsley children's services on 11 and 12 October 2022. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Teresa Godfrey and Russel Breyer.

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

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

### **Headline findings**

Since the last inspection in October 2021, senior leaders have continued to prioritise improvement in children's services and secured a significant financial investment of £3.7 million. This additional funding has supported a recent restructure and the development of specialist services, such as the extension of the family group conference service, multisystemic therapy (MST) team and the SHIELD service for children at risk of exploitation. Additional family support worker posts have been created to ensure a more effective response to children experiencing domestic abuse. Social work services for disabled children have improved since the last inspection, and are now realigned within the education and inclusion service. The quality of pre-proceedings work has improved following the findings of a peer review. As a result of these changes, children in Knowsley have benefited from a more effective range of support and services than was the case a year ago.

While these are positive developments, the quality of social work practice remains variable across the service. Children's plans are too task-focused and lack clear, measurable outcomes. Management oversight, including supervision, is not always clearly recorded or sufficiently challenging in order to drive improvements in the quality of social work practice. This means that there is sometimes a lack of timely improvement in children's circumstances. Senior leaders acknowledged that these

were issues identified during the last inspection and have not improved as quickly as required.

The local authority's self-evaluation of social work practice accurately identifies these areas for improvement and acknowledges that more work needs to be done to bring about the necessary cultural shift in the workforce, in order to raise aspirations and develop an outcomes-focused approach for children and their families.

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

- The quality of management oversight and supervision, in order to provide effective support and challenge to drive outcomes for children.
- The consistent quality of plans to ensure that they are ambitious and outcome-focused.

### **Main findings**

Children in Knowsley are seen regularly by social workers, who spend time building positive, trusting relationships with them. Social workers engage effectively with children and their parents, and families are receptive to the support provided, which can lead to positive change.

Children are visited regularly, and this is often supplemented by additional visits from specialist support workers from MST and SHIELD. However, this work is not always clearly recorded on the child's record and sibling records are not routinely consolidated. This has made it difficult to identify the level of visiting frequency for some children during this focused visit. Inspectors were provided with additional assurance from senior managers to clarify this issue, but the child's record is not as clear and up to date as it needs to be.

Social workers carry out direct work with children, although this is not always clearly linked to a specific plan or measurable outcome. This means that it is not sufficiently clear how social workers measure and assess improvements in children's lives, as a result of the support that is provided. Assessments appropriately address the relevant issues for children and their families, and consider relevant historical information, including from partner agencies, to support an analysis of risk. Assessments include the wishes and feelings of children, and consider parental capacity to meet children's needs in the immediate and longer term. Assessments balance need and risk well, and provide a clear rationale for next steps to protect children. This is an area of improvement since the last inspection.

Disabled children benefit from assessments which are sensitively completed in recognition of the complex nature of their needs and vulnerabilities, leading to appropriate plans of support and protection. There is now evidence of positive child-

centred practice, which has an appropriate emphasis on understanding the child's lived experience.

SHIELD continues to provide an effective specialist service for children at risk of both criminal and sexual exploitation, and their families, who are in need of intensive support. SHIELD social workers are skilled and committed to improving outcomes for children. They spend time establishing relationships and gaining an understanding of the child's world, which leads to effective direct work and a reduction in risk to children. The impact of this work could be better evaluated if actions were clearly linked into children's overall plans.

The family group conference service has expanded and supports families well, providing timely advice and assistance to help families develop their own bespoke plans of support. The plans seen by inspectors in this service were clear, outcome-focused, and kept under regular review, to ensure that they continue to make a positive difference to children.

When children are at risk of significant harm, risk is recognised and there is a timely response, although subsequent plans for children in need, or subject to a child protection plan, are of variable quality. For example, it is not always clear what the contingency arrangements will be if progress cannot be sustained. This means that some children and families lack clarity about the purpose and possible outcomes of their plans, which has the potential to impede progress for children. Plans are also too focused on tasks and actions to be completed, rather than on outcomes to ensure sustainable change. For a small number of children on child protection plans, this sometimes leads to periods of intervention with limited progress being made.

Despite this, some children on child in need and child protection plans do make progress, supported by social workers who understand the level of risk and need well, which ensures that the appropriate level of support is provided. The introduction of a new child protection panel to oversee the level of progress at the 12-month point has ensured that children do not remain on plans for longer than necessary. This is a relatively new development, and offers some additional management oversight of the most vulnerable children in Knowsley.

Child in need meetings, core groups and children protection reviews are held regularly and are well attended by relevant professionals, who share appropriate information. Although reviews take place in accordance with each child's individual needs, they focus too much on task and actions, rather than children's outcomes. This means that they are not always effective at driving improvement and ensuring that children and families are clear about the longer-term aims of their plan, or what the possible outcomes might be should the plan not work. Child protection review chairs escalate concerns about the progression of the plan in accordance with a clear escalation policy, but this was not consistently effective across the service.

Thresholds are applied appropriately for children who are subject to a child in need or child protection plan. Inspectors saw well-considered step-up and step-down

processes being applied, leading to ongoing assessment and support to ensure that children's needs continue to be met when circumstances change. This means that children receive services that are appropriate and proportionate to the changing level of need or risk they experience.

Pre-proceedings are initiated appropriately when progress is too slow and the local authority decides that legal action may be necessary. This element of practice is tightly monitored, regular reviews are held to monitor progress, and authoritative action is taken when children's circumstances do not improve. Critical decisions are clearly recorded on children's records, which means that key decision-making points are accessible and can be understood. Letters before proceedings clearly outline concerns and what changes are required. Inspectors were satisfied that children are stepped up to, and out of, this process appropriately, which reduces drift and delay for children. This is an improvement since the last inspection.

Supervision and management oversight of social work practice is mostly regular, but not always clearly recorded on children's case records. Supervision evidences task-focused discussions, but there is inconsistent detailed reflection about the longer-term goals and outcomes for children. The impact of supervision on the quality of practice is not consistently clear, as it does not always challenge social workers effectively or drive forward required changes. Additional management oversight can be seen on the child's record through case notes, but this is not always cognisant of the whole story for the child and, at times, lacks rigour to drive improvement.

The audits that inspectors reviewed were of variable quality. Some were overly focused on compliance and process, with others balancing strengths of practice and identifying areas for development more accurately. Moderation adds value but is inconsistently used, and learning from the audit process is not clearly transferred into practice in a timely way.

Senior leaders have been working alongside a sector-led improvement partner to improve the quality assurance framework, including audit activity, since the last inspection. As such, detailed collaborative audits ceased for a four-month period in recent months while this work was completed. Although there was regular 'dip sampling' of specific areas of practice during this time, this did not provide senior leaders with the level of detail required to offer sufficient assurance about the quality of social work practice. The process of piloting a new audit tool template commenced in recent weeks, which means that there are now improved tools in place to encourage a more reflective, strengths-based and outcome-focused interaction between auditor and social worker.

Social workers in Knowsley feel that the local authority is supportive and well structured. Staff speak positively about working for Knowsley and describe senior managers as visible and accessible. Social workers have regular training

opportunities, and all were able to clearly articulate the model of practice, and explain to inspectors how this informs their work with children and families.

Senior leaders were transparent with inspectors about the nature of workforce challenges in recent months, including increased caseloads in some teams. As such, funding for additional family support worker posts has been secured on a temporary basis for the next 12 months to offer more support to busy teams. There is also an awareness of the fluctuations in workforce stability more recently. This can be attributed, in part, to the recent restructure, which has seen some social workers promoted into management positions within the organisation. This has led to an increase in social work vacancies, some of which have been filled on a temporary basis by agency staff. Senior leaders are also aware of the need for a cultural shift within the staff group to ensure that all managers and practitioners are less focused on compliance and performance measures, and more ambitious for children and their families.

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

Yours sincerely

Teresa Godfrey  
**His Majesty's Inspector**