

2 August 2021

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Dear Steve

Focused visit to Liverpool children's services

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic.

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Liverpool children's services on 22 and 23 June 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Lorna Schlechte and Lisa Summers.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need, including those who are subject to a child protection plan.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. However, the delivery model was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 context. The lead inspector and the director of children's services agreed arrangements to deliver this visit effectively while working within national and local guidelines for responding to COVID-19. This visit was carried out fully on site.

Headline findings

Most children in Liverpool benefit from an effective range of support and services, which are making a difference to their lives. Further work is required to ensure that children receive high-quality assessment and plans that address their needs. Senior leaders use detailed performance information well to help them understand the quality of social work practice and are very clear where practice needs to be improved.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The quality of analysis, and inclusion of historical concerns and wider family issues, in assessments of children's needs.

- The quality of plans to ensure that children's progress is clearly measured.
- Letters before proceedings to ensure that they are child-focused and clear about what needs to change.

Main findings

There has been a high rate of COVID-19 infection in Liverpool during the pandemic. The partnership has planned and delivered a well-coordinated and effective response, with a focus on supporting the most vulnerable children and families. Short-break facilities for disabled children were kept open to provide support and prevent unnecessary entry into care. Despite this, senior leaders acknowledged that some services to children have been delayed due to the impact of COVID-19.

Children in Liverpool are seen regularly by social workers who know them well. This has continued throughout the pandemic, despite lockdown restrictions. Bespoke packages of support are delivered to children subject to child in need and child protection plans by social workers and family support workers, and these are adapted to changing needs and escalating risk. However, some children have experienced long-term cyclical periods of social work intervention, without long-term change being sustained. This has led to an increase in re-referrals, child protection plans and children coming into care. This means that some children experience neglect for too long before concerns are escalated.

When children are at risk of harm, there is a timely response, with safety plans used effectively while assessments are completed. Many assessments focus too much on presenting concerns, and do not sufficiently explore history or information from wider family members to understand the current context of concerns. As a result, the root causes of those parenting behaviours which pose a risk to children are not always clearly explored. Culture and identity issues are not always explored in sufficient detail, although there are a small number of examples of careful consideration for individual children. Senior leaders recognise that assessments are sometimes over-optimistic, and are not always updated regularly to inform planning and critical decision-making, such as stepping down from child protection plans to child in need plans. The stronger elements in assessments of children's needs are that they incorporate detailed information from a broad range of partners and consistently use the local authority's chosen model of practice to identify risk and protective factors.

The plans for children in need and for those subject to child protection do not always reflect the wide range of work being completed with families by social workers, family support workers and other professionals. Plans do not clearly identify what needs to change for children and are too task-focused. They also lack specificity about who is to do what, by when, against specific actions. Despite clearly articulating the overarching priority using the preferred model of practice, there is a lack of clear contingency planning. This means that parents will not always understand what actions will be taken if progress is not achieved. This limits the

usefulness of plans as a tool to measure progress of parental capacity to sustain change. Senior leaders acknowledge that this is an area for improvement and explained that they have appropriate plans in place to introduce new practice standards in the coming months.

The majority of children benefit from regular, timely reviews of their plan through child in need and child protection reviews, and core groups. Partners mostly attend key meetings with relevant professionals regularly, contributing to discussions about the child and scaling risk appropriately. There is also evidence of child protection conference chairs reviewing the progress of children in between reviews, although the quality of this is not always consistent, particularly when change is not being achieved or families are resistant to change.

The newly established adolescent team provides opportunities for some focused and purposeful social work with teenagers at risk of exploitation and for those on the edge of care, who are subject both to child in need and child protection plans.

Inspectors observed some purposeful social work in the disabled children team, where multi-agency support is tailored to the specific needs of disabled children and their parents. However, high caseloads have sometimes impacted on the ability of social workers to update assessments regularly, which means that plans are not always reflective of current concerns or specialist assessments.

Since the last inspection, the response to pre-proceedings under the Public Law Outline has been strengthened. For example, when circumstances do not improve, timely decisions are made to escalate into pre-proceedings in the vast majority of children's cases. Children are reviewed by a panel on a regular basis and purposeful work is completed with families. Senior managers have a tight grip on this area of practice, and use monitoring and review mechanisms appropriately to minimise potential drift. Delays are well understood, and many are attributable to the challenges experienced during the pandemic, such as delays in completing specialist assessments or in parents accessing independent legal support. Reviews of children in pre-proceedings are detailed, overseen by the assistant director, and provide a clear rationale underpinning critical decisions. However, senior leaders have recognised the need to improve letters before proceedings to ensure that they are jargon-free, concise and personalised in order to clearly define what needs to change for children.

Social workers who were spoken to during this visit were very positive about working for Liverpool. Caseloads are still too high, and both managers and social workers have told us that this can impact on practice. A phased programme of recruitment to increase capacity has been challenging, with managers having difficulties in recruiting experienced, permanent staff during the pandemic. This has resulted in a high proportion of newly qualified social workers who are managing some complex work with families. The need for additional support for these staff has been appropriately identified by senior leaders, and has led to a recent increase in the

number of practice development officers, with the aim of improving the quality of practice through audit, practice standards and training.

Despite the challenges of managing increasing demand during a pandemic, staff continue to benefit from a wide range of virtual training. Training has focused on embedding the preferred model of practice, encouraging analytical thinking and increasing the use of neglect tools across the partnership. Managers understand that this is crucial to skilling up social work staff and partners to recognise and respond to risk effectively, to ensure that there is a commonality of language on the child's case record, and to address the complex nature of inter-generational neglect in some families.

There is evidence of management oversight in children's records, which provides an effective rationale for next steps. There are sometimes gaps in supervision frequency and a lack of reflection on what strategies are most effective to support social workers who are struggling to engage with resistant families.

The quality of audits has improved since the previous focused visit, although senior leaders acknowledge that it is still maturing and there is more to do to ensure that auditors use a consistent approach. There is now a detailed audit tool which highlights the key areas where practice needs to be improved. Audits are now moderated; managers reflect on the outcomes and ensure that learning is disseminated effectively to frontline social workers. Quality assurance activity also includes regular observations of practice, dip sampling and multi-agency thematic audits, and the learning from this is incorporated into improvement planning.

There continues to be significant financial investment in the children's social care workforce to increase capacity in line with a service redesign launched towards the end of 2019. Although many of these posts have been recruited to, there is still some way to go to fill these posts and recruit an experienced, permanent workforce. This means that social workers still experience high caseloads across the service during a period of increased demand. Improvement planning and self-assessment processes are appropriately focused on reducing caseloads and improving the quality of assessments of children's needs and plans for children. Senior leaders were open and candid with inspectors during the visit about the need for wider organisational change. Strategic plans are appropriately focused on addressing the wider systemic issues across the partnership in relation to deprivation, poverty and neglect.

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

Your sincerely

Lorna Schlechte
Her Majesty's Inspector