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Dear Ms McLoughlin

Focused visit to Stockport children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Stockport children's services on 24 and 25 January 2024. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Lisa Summers and Gareth Dakin.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need and 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. 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 inspection in April 2022, where services were judged to be good overall, there has been a greater demand for children's services and an increase in the complexity of work, against a backdrop of increased staff turnover and more inexperience across the workforce. This has had a detrimental impact on the consistency of quality of practice for some children in need of help and protection. The quality of assessments, plans and planning is inconsistent, and a small number of children do not always get the right support at the right time.

The stable and experienced senior leadership team has continued to develop and deliver evidence-based practice and impactful ways of working through trauma-informed approaches with families. There are dedicated programmes for fathers and impressive edge-of-care services. These interventions are helping to deliver positive changes to most families by improving the quality of parenting.

Robust quality assurance mechanisms are enabling managers to understand service strengths and challenges. Senior leaders are aware of service shortfalls and, in October 2023, they refreshed their plans for improvement in line with the known service challenges. These plans are appropriately focused on stabilising the workforce, developing core practice standards and bolstering the skills of the workforce, including those social workers in their assessed and supported year in employment (ASYE).

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

- The quality of assessments so that these consistently consider children's history, triangulate information from appropriate professionals and provide a clear analysis that reflects children's circumstances.
- The quality of plans and planning so that these are consistently focused on children's experiences and progress with clear contingency planning and timescales to prevent delays in accessing the right support.
- The consistency of direct work with children, to test the impact of plans, and to support social workers' understanding of children's views, wishes and feelings.
- The quality of supervision so that this is reflective, challenging and child-focused, with clear timescales for actions that are consistently reviewed to ensure completion.

Main findings

Children's assessments are inconsistent in quality. Stronger assessments are thorough and informed by a broad range of sources and consider children's history consistently well. Support for children and families is provided throughout the assessment period. In weaker assessments, there is insufficient analysis and use of history, or there is an over-focus on the presenting issue to the detriment of understanding all of a child's needs to best inform plans.

Child-in-need and child protection plans vary in quality. Better plans are child-focused, individualised and appropriately detailed, with clear contingencies. They helpfully identify short-, medium- and long-term aims, clearly detailing what is to be achieved for children. This is helping families to understand what they need to achieve and what will happen if children's lives do not improve. Some written plans do not always detail the richness of the support that children receive. Weaker plans are overly lengthy, providing a list of tasks to be completed, and too many lack clear timescales. For a very small number of children, review meetings have not been held at the required frequency. For some other children, there is insufficient management challenge in supervision to progress the actions identified in the child's plan. As a result, some actions do not progress at pace, and some children experience delays in getting the support they need.

Children's plans are mostly reviewed through well-attended multi-agency meetings. Children's current circumstances are considered, and, in some instances, children attend meetings. In these cases, they contribute to and influence planning decisions. There is more work to do to review the impact of the plan on children's lives and to empower professionals in multi-agency meetings to adapt children's plans to reflect the family's current circumstances.

While children are seen regularly by skilled and committed social workers, direct work with children is not consistently carried out. When this does take place, it is child-focused and age-appropriate, helping social workers to understand children's views, wishes and feelings. Some direct work is delivered by professionals with whom the child has the best relationship, and this is supporting more effective engagement with children.

Social workers show patience, kindness and understanding in engaging and building positive relationships with parents. This is helping parents to make the changes needed to improve children's experiences. Relationships between social workers and children are preserved as much as possible through keeping social work team transition points to a minimum. This supports the continuity of relationships and enables workers to develop a deeper understanding of children's needs.

Children benefit from an extensive range of services and support. This includes domestic abuse services, intensive support, tailored groups for fathers, and therapeutic support through New Beginnings, which is helping parents to overcome the trauma they have experienced. The edge-of-care service in Stockport is well developed and aspirational, providing bespoke support that is helping some children to stay safely at home. These interventions are making a real difference to the lives of children and their families.

Senior managers recognise that there is more to do to improve the response to children living in neglectful situations. Use of the graded care profile is not consistent and not all social workers are trained to deliver this. When this is utilised, social worker capacity issues mean that assessments are not routinely reviewed. This is limiting social workers' ability to fully understand neglect suffered by children and hinders focused planning.

Social work practice is underpinned by the Stockport family model. This model is mature, well embedded and fully implemented. Social workers and partners understand the model's principles, and this permeates their work with children and families. This is facilitating a more collaborative and coordinated approach to working with families. As a result, some children's lives improve.

Thresholds for different levels of social work intervention are clear, well understood and consistently applied. As a result, when children's circumstances change, social

workers are responsive and arrangements to step up and down between different levels of support are seamless.

Senior managers have strengthened the oversight of children in the pre-proceedings phase of the Public Law Outline (PLO) through improved tracking mechanisms and regular monitoring by senior management. Legal gateway meetings are well attended, providing consistency in decision-making at a locality level. Senior management's reviews are regular, bringing appropriate challenge and professional curiosity to support an understanding of children's circumstances and next steps. Work to ensure consistent recording of reviews is currently being addressed. Senior managers are aware that there is more to do so that reviews constantly monitor whether children's lives are improving to inform decision-making. Senior managers are working collaboratively across the region to improve the use of the PLO, including the quality of letters before proceedings.

Senior leaders recognise the need to improve the consistency and quality of supervision. Although new templates are in place to support consistency in reflective practices, these are not always used to help social workers think through challenges or consider the impact of interventions for children. Actions are mostly task-orientated and too many lack timescales. These are not routinely checked for completion. As a result, some actions are not completed quickly enough, which, for a small number of children, contributes to drift.

Social workers value the opportunity to undertake group supervision and learning circles. This is helping them to think through problems and difficulties, and also to understand wider issues impacting on the children they work with. Given the lack of good-quality affordable housing in Stockport, a recent session on poor housing conditions was held. This is helping social workers to identify, and take action to reduce, the detrimental impact of damp and mould on children's health.

Social workers are overwhelmingly positive about working for Stockport. They reported how they value the restorative approach to working with families. They said that this has been central in attracting them to work for Stockport and in retaining their expertise in the authority. They reflected how this approach permeates the service at every level and how they feel supported by accessible managers and leaders. ASYE social workers value the additional support from mentors who are cultivating the development of their practice.

Some social workers reported that their workloads are high and are increasing in complexity. They felt that working with children across the spectrum of thresholds is helping them to develop new skills, knowledge and experience. However, higher workloads are preventing social workers from doing the direct work they want to deliver, due to competing demands. Managers routinely review caseloads on a weekly basis, and they take action to ensure that these are more manageable. Social workers confirmed that workloads have recently started to reduce. Senior leaders

recognise the importance of continuing to take assertive action to recruit and retain social workers. There is strong corporate financial support for this, and improved salary and conditions have been secured from April 2024. Recruitment campaigns are targeted, but national challenges in attracting experienced social workers mean that many staff are newly qualified. There is a concerted effort to support agency workers into permanent posts. As a result, the reliance on agency staff is comparatively low.

Quality assurance mechanisms are embedded and robustly bring together auditing activity, observations of practice and feedback from social workers, children and families. Audits are detailed, child-centred and reflective. Subsequent actions are now tracked for completion. Although most audits clearly identify strengths and areas for improvement, not all shortfalls translate into clear actions. This is a missed opportunity to maximise learning and further improve children's outcomes. Audits are completed alongside social workers, who value these interactions with managers and these opportunities to share best practice. Social workers reported that practice weeks and reviews are useful and enjoyable. They said that these are helping them to reflect on and improve their practice.

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

Yours sincerely

Lisa Summers
His Majesty's Inspector