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Dear Mr Boyce

Monitoring visit to Knowsley Council local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Knowsley Council's children's services on 3 and 4 August 2016. This was the fifth visit to support improvement but the first published monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in June 2014. The inspectors were Paula Thomson-Jones and Lolly Rascagneres. The inspectors identified that progress has been made towards achieving the priority actions in the area of help and protection reviewed by inspectors on this visit.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of the visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the area of help and protection focussing particularly on the services provided to children subject to a child protection plan.

Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, supervision records, performance data and findings from quality assurance work. In addition, they spoke to a range of staff including social workers, child protection conference chairs, team and senior managers and senior leaders.

Summary of findings

- Children in the cases reviewed are now benefiting from stable social work support from a worker who knows them well. This is as a result of the recruitment of permanent suitably-qualified staff and managers to social work teams and a low number of agency workers.

- Social work caseloads have reduced significantly, but for some staff they remain too high to ensure consistent and good quality social work for all children.
- Comprehensive and reliable performance data is available and used regularly by managers to ensure statutory work with children is completed within timescales.
- A quality assurance framework has been developed and is used effectively to evaluate the quality of services that children receive, as well as to inform service developments. This has enabled the local authority to have a better understanding of the areas of practice that require further improvement.
- Local authority managers routinely audit casework. Most of the audits seen by inspectors were detailed and resulted in appropriate learning and actions to improve outcomes for children. However, the criteria for what constitutes 'good' is not always sufficiently challenging, with outcomes for some children not as effective as the audit grading would suggest.
- Where children are at risk of harm, strategy discussions and child protection investigations are timely and ensure information sharing by appropriate agencies to support action to keep children safe.
- The timeliness and quality of assessments have improved, and children are seen as part of their assessments and their views recorded. Children do not however, benefit from consistent evaluation of historical information or analysis of how risk factors impact on their lives. This means that the overall quality of assessments remains variable. In addition, children do not have their needs routinely reassessed over time to evaluate progress or inform key decision making and this is contributing to drift and delay for some children.
- Significant work undertaken to improve the electronic system has supported more effective recording of work with children and enables better understanding and evaluation of a child's journey.
- Visits to children are completed by social workers a minimum of once every four weeks. Children are routinely seen and spoken to alone and their views recorded, but records do not consistently contain sufficient analysis by workers of the context of information that children share or the non-verbal communication that they observe.
- Child protection plans are in place for all children; these are regularly reviewed and updated. While work has been done to try and improve the quality of plans, this has not yet resulted in all plans being consistently focused on outcomes or progress being accurately measured. As a result, plans are not always effective in improving outcomes for children.

- Core groups take place every four weeks, with all relevant agencies sharing information and monitoring activity, but meetings do not focus consistently on assessing the progress of the plan, the impact of the work done, or evaluation to determine if risk is reducing for children.
- Social workers complete most reports prior to conference within timescale; the vast majority of reports are shared with parents prior to the meeting. The quality of these reports is too variable, with many lacking sufficient analysis of whether the plan is reducing risk or improving outcomes for children.
- The minutes of conferences are clear, with strong evidence of information sharing from partners and parents, consideration of risks and protective factors, and some evidence of the views of parents and children recorded. Agencies routinely provide written reports prior to conference, with contributions from health and education professionals seen for all children.
- Child protection conference chairs track the work done with children and record this on case files. Evidence seen on the cases reviewed showed that they offer some challenge to workers and managers about lack of progress or action, but that this had not always resulted in children receiving a better quality or timely service.
- Social workers spoken to during the visit had regular formal supervision to support, manage and monitor the service that children receive, with decisions about casework evident on children's records. Further work is underway to support social workers to better prepare for supervision and ensure more reflective discussions about the work done with children.
- Social workers and managers in the child protection teams demonstrate passion and commitment to children and young people and are positive about working in Knowsley. Staff spoken to describe the service as having made real progress, with stable teams, strong management support, clear expectations, and they feel valued by the local authority. All felt that caseloads had improved but some further reductions would support them to undertake more direct work with children.

Evaluation of progress

The 2014 inspection contained specific priority actions and recommendations to improve services for children subject to child protection plans. These included:

- Ensure that statutory visits to children and young people on child protection plans are regular and carried out by suitably experienced social workers, that children are seen alone and that records include their views.

- Ensure that core groups are held regularly and that agencies involved with the family routinely attend in order that information is fully shared and plans are understood and carried out promptly.
- Improve the quality of plans, in particular ensure that they are specific, measurable, have timescales, and are written clearly in order that all involved understand what they need to do.
- Ensure that professionals invited to child protection conferences consistently provide written reports so that all risks are considered and appropriate decisions and plans can be made.
- Ensure that social work reports for child protection conferences include an up-to-date assessment of risk, and are shared with the family before the day of the conference.
- Improve scrutiny and challenge by child protection conference chairs and independent reviewing officers, in particular in cases where there has been or there is risk of drift and delay in plans being progressed.

There has been improvement in all of these areas.

Children benefit from speaking with suitably experienced social workers, who know them well, at their regular statutory visits and their views are recorded. Children have child protection plans that are routinely updated because of multi-agency core group meetings that take place regularly. Partner agencies participate in core groups and coordinate delivery of support and services to families. However, the quality and effectiveness of the plans and core group records seen on this visit still require improvement to be good, and there needs to be greater focus on children's experiences and outcomes to ensure that timely action is taken to prevent drift and delay.

Prior to conferences, social workers and other agencies prepare written reports that form the basis of good information sharing, but these reports do not consistently analyse risk or evaluate the impact of the plan on children's lives. Child protection conference chairs scrutinise the work done with children but this does not always lead to robust challenge and timely action to improve services for children.

The progress identified on this visit is the result of the actions of senior leaders, managers and staff to improve services. There has been a focus on creating the right environment for good social work practice, including effective staff recruitment, retention and reduction of caseloads.

The use of effective performance information to ensure compliance and raise standards has resulted in basic requirements being met for all children's cases seen

during this visit by inspectors. The quality assurance framework has been effective in identifying learning and while this has supported improvement from the practice seen at the inspection further work is needed to ensure the consistency of quality.

The local authority is aware that having achieved stability and compliance, it must now improve the consistency of the quality of services that children receive. There is clear understanding of the areas of practice that need to improve and these need to be prioritised alongside continued reduction in caseloads, more robust management oversight, increased reflection in supervision, and in ensuring that quality assurance of work supports a clear vision of what good provision would look like for children and young people.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Paula Thomson-Jones

Her Majesty's Inspector