

22 December 2016

Paul Boyce
Executive Director (Children)
Knowsley Council
Municipal Buildings
Archway Road
Huyton
Merseyside
L36 9YU

Dear Paul

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 22 and 23 November 2016. This was the sixth visit to support improvement and the second published monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in June 2014. The inspectors were Sue Myers HMI and Stella Elliott HMI (designate). The inspectors identified that progress has been made towards achieving the priority actions in the area of achieving permanence for children, including adoption.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of the visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the area of achieving permanence for children, including adoption. The visit focused particularly on the services provided to children looked after following their second review meeting.

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

Summary of findings

- Children identified in the cases reviewed are being well supported by workers, who know them well. This is as a result of the children looked after teams being comprised of a stable and permanent workforce of social workers and managers. Social workers spoken to were passionate about and committed to their work with children.

- Social work caseloads on the CLA teams are manageable and this enables

social workers to spend time talking to and listening to children. Children benefit from good quality direct work to understand their life stories and express their wishes and feelings. Social workers are now able to complete work within expected timescales. This has led to a reduction in the average length of time a case is in proceedings to below the recommended time of 26 weeks.

- Reliable performance data is now available and used regularly by managers to monitor performance and ensure that work with children is completed within timescales. This reflects the finding at the last monitoring visit for children in need of help and protection and shows that this improvement is now service wide.
- A quality assurance framework is embedded and is used effectively to evaluate the quality of services that children receive. There are some effective tools and systems in place to monitor performance and these are becoming part of everyday practice. Staff view the quality assurance of their work as an opportunity to learn and improve their practice.
- Frontline staff told inspectors that there is an improved culture in Knowsley that is more inclusive. Senior managers are approachable and lead by example by being ambitious for children. Team managers are supportive and trusted by staff. Staff feel well supported by their managers and through better training and development opportunities.
- Local authority managers routinely audit casework, including the dip sampling of cases on a regular basis. The audits seen by inspectors are thorough and focus on learning and providing direction to improve outcomes for children. Findings from individual audits are independently moderated and fed back to social workers in a reflective session with the auditor, and this promotes learning.
- Significant work undertaken to improve the electronic system has supported more effective recording of casework. This enables better understanding and evaluation of a child's journey and the decisions and actions taken by professionals working with them. Helpful case summaries capture the child's history, their relationships and their needs.
- Arrangements to transfer cases from safeguarding teams to CLA teams are now clearer and have improved the quality and timeliness of assessment and planning. The CLA teams are responsible for developing and implementing care plans for children from the point of the first interim order. This delivers stronger ownership of the care plan and has improved the quality of planning for children looked after. Social workers are clear about the child's plan and written plans are up to date. However, some do not contain clear, detailed contingency plans.

- While social workers demonstrate an understanding of race and religion, not all issues of diversity are well considered in children's case records and plans. This weakness is not being identified through the audit tool, which does not require staff to record whether or not issues of diversity have been considered.
- Work with extended family members who could have a key role in the child's life but are not part of the main household is not always undertaken. Work with fathers to encourage their engagement and involvement in their child's plan is not consistently effective.
- The active involvement of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) is evident for most of the cases that were scrutinised during the monitoring visit. Evidence seen in the cases reviewed showed that IROs offer some challenge to workers and managers about lack of progress. However, it is not clear that these challenges always result in action being taken to ensure that children receive a better quality service. Minutes from children's reviews clearly record actions, decisions and rationale for plans made. Children are seen by their IRO prior to reviews and are helped to contribute their views.
- Supervision takes place regularly for social workers. There are increasing opportunities for reflective sessions following audits and during case discussions. But records of reflective sessions are not kept in the supervision record to support an overview of workers' learning. Workers have access to training and research about attachment theory, child development and the impact of loss for children. It is not clear from case notes that this is consistently being used to better understand children's needs or to help make decisions and plans for children.
- Contact arrangements are not always specifically considered in all children's plans, especially for brothers and sisters who are living apart. Ongoing contact arrangements are not always assessed and reviewed as children's needs and circumstances change. The impact on children of ending contact with their families is not well analysed or recorded in some cases.
- When a child has a plan for adoption, effort is made to reduce any potential delay. Performance data regarding timeliness in placing children for adoption indicates that Knowsley has maintained a steady improvement over the past year. Cases tracked at this monitoring visit show that this improvement is continuing. In the past six months, no child has waited longer than 18 months between entering care and moving in with their adoptive family.
- Viability assessments and special guardianship order reports indicated effective use of research and reflection. Assessments are evaluative and analytical. Social workers are realistic about opportunities and plans without losing sight of their commitment for the best outcome for each child.

- Prior to one recent disrupted adoption placement, there had been no other disruptions for four years. The recent disruption, occurring three weeks after placement, will be analysed to assist in future learning.
- Social workers on the adoption team describe improvements in standards and expectations of practice. Supervision now takes place regularly, with additional support to newly qualified workers. Social workers and managers acknowledge that the decreased use of agency workers has supported improved team collaboration and ownership of children's futures.
- Improvements in assessment and planning has led to an improved understanding of the types of placements needed to support children looked after in Knowsley. There is a clear commitment to recruit foster carers and adoptive parents for family groups, children with additional needs and teenagers. This reflects the identified need for such placements. There is a range of creative family finding activities on offer to help match children with approved adopters.
- The development of fostering to adopt has been slow but it has now started. There is one child now in placement. Currently, this model is not strongly promoted. It is discussed briefly during initial training but there is minimal interest so far. More could be done so that social workers and prospective adopters understand the benefits of this approach.
- Support provided to social workers and schools for children looked after by the virtual head has resulted in a marked improvement in the completion rates of personal education plans. These have increased from 46% completed in October 2015 to 90% at the time of the visit. The virtual head will be working with children who are in the process of adoption, but this has yet to be ratified organisationally.

Evaluation of progress

Following the inspection by Ofsted in 2014, the local authority recognised that in order to achieve immediate and sustainable improvement, they needed to focus on a number of key outcomes. Inspectors found in the elements considered for children looked after that there has been improvement.

Children are supported by social workers who know them well and who are passionate and ambitious about their work. Children are encouraged and are helped to have their voices heard.

The stable workforce is being supported by their managers, and staff are offered good levels of training and development.

The quality of practice and planning for children has improved overall. However, further improvement is needed as plans do not yet address issues of diversity: they do not always demonstrate work to engage men and fathers and the arrangements for contact between children and their families are not always clearly stated.

There is evidence of improved oversight and scrutiny through effective auditing processes and stronger oversight from managers and IROs.

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 culture for good social work practice, including effective staff retention, training and development and sustainable caseloads.

The use of effective performance information to monitor work and raise standards has resulted in improved practice in the cases seen during this visit by inspectors. The quality assurance framework has been effective in identifying areas for improvement and learning, but has not yet led to consistently good practice across the service. The local authority is aware that having achieved stability and compliance, it must now continue and sustain the improvement and consistency of the quality of services that children receive.

The local authority has a clear understanding of the areas of practice that need further improvement, including the better use of theory and research to understand the impact of decisions on children, better engagement of men and fathers, and the need to ensure that issues of diversity are well understood and responded to.

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

Yours sincerely

Sue Myers
Her Majesty's Inspector