

10 February 2017

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Dear Linda

Monitoring visit to Lancashire County Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit on 11 and 12 January 2017, undertaken by Shirley Bailey HMI and Stella Elliott HMI. This was the fifth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in November 2015, following an inspection in September 2015.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in an area judged to be inadequate at the 2015 inspection: help and protection. Inspectors focused on children who are privately fostered and children subject to child in need and child protection plans, both in locality teams and in the children with disabilities team (CWDT).

During the visit, the 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 managers, social workers, independent reviewing officers, senior managers and senior leaders.

The local authority continues to build on the improvements seen at the last visit. At this monitoring visit, inspectors saw positive outcomes for some children due to the local authority's intervention. However, the pace of change is not consistent across teams, and it is more advanced for children subject to child protection plans than for children subject to children in need plans. The local authority recognises that more needs to be done to ensure that all children receive a good service.

Evaluation of progress

The inspection in September 2015 identified specific areas requiring improvement for children in need of help and protection. These included:

- ensuring that audit work is undertaken and used effectively to drive improvement in the quality of frontline social work practice
- ensuring that the independent reviewing service undertakes consistent regular oversight of practice and care planning in children's cases
- ensuring that managers' decisions, as recorded on cases files, explain what evidence they have considered and on what basis their decision has been reached
- ensuring that all children in need are provided with sufficient oversight from qualified social workers and managers to ensure robust care planning and ongoing effective analysis of risk
- ensuring that children who are privately fostered and their carers are assessed and visited within required timescales
- Ensuring that assessments and plans are informed by historical information and diversity factors, and that they focus on the experience of the child and accurately assess risk.

The local authority established a comprehensive audit programme of safeguarding in locality teams in June 2016, and this is now well embedded. At the last monitoring visit in September 2016, auditing did not consistently result in deficits in practice being identified or addressed. The contribution that audit was making to improve either compliance with procedures or the quality of practice was not always evident. Since then, the consistency of audit findings has improved, and identified actions are being completed increasingly swiftly. In almost all cases seen by inspectors, audit had improved compliance. The time taken by auditors to ensure that social workers and managers understand the reasons for any recommendations made is improving the quality of practice for some children.

CWDT was not included in auditing activity until December 2016. Although the team mainly works with children and families for whom there are no concerns in relation to parenting, a small number of children require additional help to ensure that they are safeguarded, including some who are subject to child protection plans. For a period of six months, there was no audit of the work undertaken with this highly vulnerable group of children. On this visit, inspectors saw no detriment to children as a result of this omission, and the quality of work done with children in need of help and protection seen in CWDT was mostly good. However, improvement to case recording and updating assessments is not as advanced as in other parts of the service in which auditing is well established, and is sometimes poor. Now that one cycle of audit has taken place, the local authority recognises that the current audit tool requires adaptation to reflect the full range of social work undertaken in CWDT. Positively, members of the team are involved in developing a tool that will better evaluate the quality of practice with all disabled children.

The interim director of children's services has had responsibility for supporting Lancashire in the implementation of the improvement plan, but has not had strategic responsibility for some areas of the service, including CWDT. Some workers in the team, while reporting recent improvements, feel that the wider organisation does not understand the specialised nature of the work that they do, leading to unnecessary and unrealistic demands. The local authority has recently appointed a full-time, permanent director of children's services and plans to transfer strategic responsibility for the service when she takes up post. It anticipates that this will address workers' concerns and ensure that they feel that they are a valued part of children's social care. However, at the time of this visit, it acknowledges that the CWDTs' involvement in the improvement journey has not kept pace with other areas of the service.

The local authority has invested significantly in the recruitment and training of independent reviewing officers (IROs). IROs continue to contribute positively to improvements in practice with children subject to child protection plans. Mid-point checks had already been established at the point of the last monitoring visit, but did not always result in the improvements being addressed. At this visit, responses to issues raised by IROs were timely, resulting in improved services for those children. In cases seen, the quality of practice with children subject to child protection plans is stronger than for those subject to child in need plans. This is largely due to the increased effectiveness of the oversight of practice by the IRO service.

While external quality assurance, by both IROs and the programme of audits, to drive improvements in practice is working well, the pace of improvements in the effectiveness of management oversight has lagged behind. Social workers uniformly report to inspectors that they feel well supported and challenged by line managers, and that evidence of oversight is now routinely recorded. However, a combination of staff turnover and increased demand in some parts of the service means that written records are often too brief, descriptive and lack analysis. In a very small number of cases seen by inspectors, managers had not known of areas of potential concern until these were raised by inspectors. Children in need do not benefit from the additional scrutiny that IROs provide, and it is therefore imperative that improvements in the quality of line managers' scrutiny of practice, keep pace with the external quality assurance provided by IROs and through auditing.

The local authority has increased social work and managerial oversight of children in need allocated to unqualified workers through the creation of children in need teams. While it is an improvement since the inspection, this change is not yet resulting in sufficient oversight of these children, including some with complex needs. For some children, this means that they continue to receive a service when they no longer need it and, for others, that increasing risk could be missed. The local authority recognises that, for it to be fully satisfied that it is providing a consistently safe service, the social work oversight of these teams requires strengthening. It has agreed funding for additional managerial capacity and is actively recruiting additional social workers.

The local authority is not yet meeting statutory timescales for the assessment of children who are privately fostered, although the quality of assessments is sufficient. Following assessment, unqualified workers undertake statutory visits to this potentially vulnerable group of children. It is reasonable to conclude from the statutory guidance that a social worker should undertake statutory visits to children who are privately fostered.

The local authority's insistence on compliance is effective and means that it is now in a position to increase the focus onto quality of practice and this is leading to improved outcomes for some children. This is an improvement considering the variability in practice at the time of the visit. Children are routinely seen, and seen alone, within required timescales, and their wishes and feelings are recorded. Direct work with children is prioritised and, while some of the work remains superficial, inspectors saw some good examples of sensitive work undertaken with children and parents by family support workers and social workers that makes a difference to them. Assessments are generally updated regularly and are often very detailed, including consideration of history and diversity needs. However, more is needed so that the wealth of information gathered is consistently used to inform analysis of risk and results in effective planning.

The local authority is realistic about its current progress and recognises that this needs to be built upon within the context of increased demand for services. It has plans to ensure that caseloads remain manageable. However, these are yet to be tested. The recent appointment of a permanent director of children's services is a key milestone in the local authority's improvement planning. The local authority will need to ensure that this transfer of leadership is carefully managed so that the pace of improvement is maintained during this period of change and beyond.

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

Yours sincerely

Shirley Bailey

Her Majesty's Inspector