

13 June 2017

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Dear Amanda

Monitoring visit of Lancashire County Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Lancashire County Council children's services on 12 and 13 April 2017. The visit was the sixth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged to be inadequate in November 2015, following an inspection in September 2015. The inspectors were Shirley Bailey HMI, Sue Myers HMI and Lorna Schlechte HMI.

The local authority is making uneven progress in improving services for its children and young people.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the areas of children looked after and care leavers, with a particular focus on care planning and recognition of and response to risk. Progress was evaluated against recommendations in the single inspection and concerns in relation to sometimes unplanned and inappropriate placement of children identified in the inspection and monitoring of some of the local authority's children's homes.

The visit considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, performance management information and other information provided by staff and managers. In addition, we spoke to a range of staff, including senior leaders, managers, social workers and independent reviewing officers (IROs).

Overview

Improvements in the quality of practice and services provided to children looked after and care leavers have not kept pace with those seen for children in need of help and protection on previous monitoring visits. This is largely due to the local authority's necessary focus on improving the quality of practice in relation to children

in need of help and protection, which was judged as inadequate at the last inspection. Improvements in the recognition of risk and timely decision-making, when risk does not reduce for children in need of help and protection, have resulted in a significant and appropriate increase in the numbers of children becoming looked after. As of 31 August 2015, there were 1,577 children looked after compared to 1,853 at the time of this visit. The local authority has struggled to meet the challenges arising from this increased demand. While the local authority has increased staffing in the 'children in our care teams' and caseloads are reducing, it has been unsuccessful in recruiting and retaining staff, in some localities, who are of sufficient experience to match the range and complexity of the work. As a result, the quality of planning and practice with children looked after and care leavers is inconsistent and in some cases seen it was poor, resulting in insufficient consideration of risk for some children and drift and delay for others.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Based on the evidence gathered during the visit, we identified areas of strength, areas where improvement is occurring and some areas where the level of service provided to children has declined since the local authority was last inspected.

The local authority does not have a sufficiency of placements both within and outside its own resources to meet the needs of increasing numbers of children and care leavers who have complex and challenging behaviours. This scarcity of resources has resulted in some children and young people being inappropriately placed in settings, and there is insufficient consideration of the risk that they present to themselves or the destabilising effect that they can have on others.

Until recently, the local authority's response to concerns raised by Ofsted during the monitoring and inspection of its children's homes was too slow. Positively, following the appointment of the current director of children's services in February 2017 and the inclusion of residential services within her control, plans to improve the range of provision within the local authority's own children's homes and for care leavers are moving at a pace. While the local authority anticipates that the proposed changes will ensure that it will be better able to meet the needs of children and young people who have complex needs, these plans remain untested.

At the time of this visit, nearly a third of children looked after were subject to interim care orders. Demanding timescales for the completion of work in court proceedings have resulted in some delayed responses to the needs of other children, exacerbated by staff turnover in both the social work and the IRO service. Examples include delays in completion of life story work for children in longer-term placements and delays in applications for discharge of care orders, leaving children and their families subject to statutory intervention longer than necessary. In the short term, the local authority plans to reduce pressure on the 'children in our care teams' through the creation of a peripatetic team of experienced staff, a strategy that has worked well in managing demand in other parts of the service. However, at the point of this visit,

the concentration of court work within the 'children in our care teams' was a significant factor in the variability of practice seen.

The local authority has been successful in ensuring compliance with most of its own practice standards, despite increased demand. Children are generally seen alone, and workers know them well. Timeliness of statutory visits, reviews for children looked after and assessments of children's basic health needs, while declining slightly from the most recently published data, remain good. The timeliness of completion of personal education plans is improving.

Significant investment in improving the local authority's data quality ensures that senior leaders and managers have a good understanding of what is happening on the front line and are able to take remedial action when practice deteriorates. For example, as of February 2017, 71% of children who went missing from care were offered and accepted a return home interview. While this does not yet represent good performance, it demonstrates significant recent improvement compared to only 32% of children offered an interview in the six months prior to the monitoring visit, of whom nearly a third refused.

However, adherence to practice standards is not yet ensuring quality of practice or timeliness of case recording, and the standards are not always sufficiently explicit. For example, there is no requirement that some statutory visits to children looked after should be unannounced. In some cases seen, children had never had an unannounced visit, including children placed at home under placement with parents regulations. In others, workers had not recognised that seeing children outside of the home does not constitute a statutory visit. While no detriment was seen to children due to this lack of clarity, this is poor practice.

Inspectors saw some examples of effective work undertaken with children that were based on a holistic understanding of their needs, such as direct work to reduce risk by the child sexual exploitation team. However, overall, the quality of assessments and plans is variable, and some are poor. Assessments of children and care leavers are not always updated at points of transition, including assessments of children and young people who are vulnerable to exploitation or who present risk to others. In weaker assessments and plans, consideration of history does not inform workers' understanding of children's behaviour. Consequently, planning is mainly focused on practical support and does not address the emotional harm that children and care leavers have experienced that makes them vulnerable to all forms of exploitation or at risk of criminality.

Workers reported that they receive regular guidance from managers who support them well. This is not consistently reflected in case recordings, some of which have gaps in supervision records and, in others, areas for development highlighted by IROs and auditors have not been recognised by frontline managers.

Increased oversight by IROs and quality assurance of casework through audit are not yet leading to demonstrable improvements in the quality of practice or outcomes

for children looked after and care leavers. Learning from audit is limited because, in contrast to what has been seen in other monitoring visits, auditors have not had a reflective discussion with workers and managers. As a result, some workers have disputed the findings, and others, while complying with identified actions, have not understood the underlying reasons for the recommendations. Consequently, the work completed has not resulted in an improved understanding of the child's lived experience, and an opportunity has been missed to apply learning to future practice.

While IROs routinely quality assure performance, in relation to children looked after, their oversight is often focused on compliance with internal performance standards. Basic practice issues are sometimes missed: for example, ensuring that children's identity needs are fully addressed. In cases seen, when challenges by IROs have not resulted in positive change for children, escalation processes have not been used to ensure that timely action has been taken.

Work undertaken with care leavers has been strengthened through the creation of specialist teams. All care leavers now have a personal adviser and, according to data provided by the local authority as of February 2017, the proportion of care leavers who had an up-to-date pathway plan was 94%, and the proportion who had been in contact with the local authority in the previous three months was 92%. This represents considerable improvement since the last inspection. However, the local authority recognises that these improvements are not yet leading to consistently good practice. The quality of pathway plans is variable, and inspectors saw examples of very limited contact with care leavers via text messages by workers who have never met the young person. This is neither meaningful nor effective.

Inspectors found that the local authority has sometimes been slow to recognise that the level of support provided is not meeting care leavers' needs, particularly those of young people in hostel accommodation, some of whom continue to live very unsettled lives. Positively, growing numbers of care leavers are benefiting from 'staying put' arrangements with former foster carers and the stability and continuity afforded by this experience of family life into adulthood and beyond.

The local authority recognises that a negative consequence of its concentration on improving services for children in need of help and protection is that improvements in services for children looked after and care leavers have not kept pace. While the local authority has been successful in maintaining compliance in the face of significantly increased numbers of children looked after and care leavers, this has too often been at the expense of quality. The local authority understands that securing a stable workforce sufficient to meet demand is crucial to supporting its continued improvement and has ambitious plans to attract experienced staff as part of a wider strategy of workforce development and retention. While the local authority has appropriately identified that it now needs to renew its focus on embedding good practice standards throughout the service, and has plans to ensure that the workforce has the capacity to deliver, at the time of this visit some children looked after and care leavers continue to receive a poor service.

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