

14 October 2016

Paul Marshall  
Director of Children's Services  
Room 218  
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Town Hall  
Manchester  
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Dear Mr Marshall

### **Monitoring visit of Manchester City Council's local authority children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit of Manchester City Council's local authority children's services on 14 and 15 September 2016 by Paula Thomson-Jones HMI and Sue Myers HMI. This was the second visit to support improvement but the first published monitoring visit letter since the local authority children's services was judged inadequate in June 2014.

The local authority has made improvements where there had been very poor practice and has made some progress towards meeting the recommendations from the last inspection. These recommendations were the focus for this monitoring visit. Senior leaders and managers demonstrated a good understanding of the improvements required and the pace of change has increased significantly in the last six months, with appropriate plans now in place to support change. The local authority's investment in and recruitment of additional social workers is now beginning to reduce social workers' caseloads, enabling increased compliance with practice standards in relation to assessments and reports to child protection conferences. Increased management capacity has led to improvements in the frequency of supervision and management systems, which are now more effective in monitoring some aspects of social work practice.

### **Areas covered by the visit**

During the course of the visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in respect of four recommendations from the previous inspection report. These were in relation to caseloads of staff and capacity to deal with demand, management oversight of the single assessment process, attendance and reports for child protection conferences, and supervision and management oversight.

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, team and senior managers and senior leaders.

## **Summary of findings**

- The average number of children allocated to each social worker has reduced since the last inspection and this is supporting work to improve the standard of practice.
- Despite managers, at all levels actively monitoring social work caseloads, there remained some variability across teams. A lack of capacity in parts of the service continues to result in caseloads for some staff remaining too high, in addition to some staff undertake work that is too complex for their experience, skills and knowledge. As a result, the quality of service that children receive is too variable, with some children not receiving effective support, as practice is not meeting the standard required.
- Senior managers and leaders recognised that in order to improve the quality of the service that children receive and to enable social workers to spend more time with each child and family, caseloads need to reduce further. They have been successful in obtaining agreement from the authority for substantial additional funding to increase capacity, with the creation of 86 additional social worker and 14 frontline manager posts. Recruitment and appointment of staff is progressing and, once complete, the local authority believes it will provide sufficient capacity to reduce caseloads consistently to the standard set by the authority: 18 children per social worker.
- Children's case records seen during this visit demonstrate improvement in the timeliness of allocation to social workers, visits and assessment of their needs. The vast majority of assessments are now completed within a 45-day timescale set by the local authority.
- Managers are now using improved quality performance information to manage and monitor the progress of assessments. However, most children's assessments are planned to meet the local authority 45-day timescale rather than being based on their individual needs.
- Children are not assessed on an ongoing basis and there is little evidence of assessments being revisited or updated when there are significant changes during the period of intervention. For some children, this results in ineffective planning and a lack of improvement in their circumstances.
- Social workers now attend child protection conferences regularly to participate in discussions about children, and in the vast majority of cases present a written report. While there has been some improvement in providing these

reports to families before conference, too many are shared on the day of the meeting, thus preventing full and informed participation of parents and carers in discussions.

- Many reports to review conferences are not effective in analysing the impact of the plan and the current levels of risk and do not offer adequate assessment of progress for children. As a result, continued risk, drift, and delay are not identified or sufficiently addressed for some children.
- Systems put in place since the previous inspection ensure that most staff get regular, formal supervision from their managers. Most case records seen demonstrate that managers are discussing the work done with children and recording this in case files.
- Supervision records seen demonstrate case discussion and some direction but there was little evidence of reflection, and in many cases the oversight by managers does not result in robust and effective decision-making for children. As a result, some children still experience a poor quality service or drift and delay despite a manager having reviewed their case.
- A newly developed quality assurance framework is enabling senior managers and leaders to have some understanding of the quality of practice and areas for improvement through organised audit activity that is regularly analysed and reported. However, the audits reviewed during this visit did not consistently offer accurate or detailed evaluation and had not identified some significant gaps in the service delivered to children.

### **Evaluation of progress**

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

- review the number of cases held by all staff, including newly qualified staff, to ensure that caseloads are manageable and that staff have sufficient time to plan and action their work. Ensure that there is a sufficient number of suitably experienced and qualified staff to deal effectively with current demand
- ensure robust management oversight of the single assessment process, both at first tier and senior management level, to ensure that children and families are seen and risks evaluated in a timescale that meets need. Ensure timeliness in completing assessments by reviewing at set points to ensure that children are seen promptly and that all work is recorded to an appropriate standard
- ensure that the allocated social worker attends case conferences, children looked after reviews and other relevant meetings and provides a report that

allows parents and carers and young people sufficient time to see, understand and comment on the report

- undertake a quality assurance audit of supervision and ensure that there is sufficient management oversight on all cases, and that social work staff are receiving appropriate support, including time for reflection and help in achieving timescales and planning progression.

There is evidence of some progress, with the pace of change increasing over the last six months. However, many key actions, such as securing funding to increase capacity, are too recent to have yet made a difference to the work done with children.

Children benefit from more timely assessment of their needs and many have social workers who have more time to work with them because their caseloads have reduced. Nearly all social workers attend conferences of those children they are responsible for subject to a child protection plan and many of them share their report with the family before the meeting takes place. However, this is not consistent, some children have social workers with high caseloads, and many families are given the report for a child protection conference on the day the meeting takes place.

Managers have improved the frequency with which they undertake formal supervision with social workers and records demonstrate that they talk to social workers about their casework. Supervision does not yet demonstrate sufficient opportunities for reflection and learning or consistently ensure that work with children is timely or of good quality.

The local authority's audit activity, put in place as part of the quality assurance framework, is designed to give senior managers an evaluation of compliance with agreed practice standards. However, audits themselves are not subject to quality assurance or moderation. As a result, while the audits provide information about compliance with tasks, they are not sufficiently robust to offer detailed insight into the quality of social work practice or what difference this is making for children.

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**