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Dear Paul

Monitoring visit to Manchester City Council local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Manchester City Council's children's services on 14 and 15 December 2016 by Sue Myers, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Sheena Doyle, Her Majesty's Inspector. This is the second published monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in June 2014. The inspectors identified that the local authority is making progress towards improving the effectiveness of child protection chairs and independent reviewing officers (IROs).

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of the visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in improving the impact of the safeguarding unit, particularly the effectiveness of child protection chairs and independent reviewing officers to oversee and monitor the progress of planning for children.

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

- Additional investment in staffing has resulted in recent reductions in workloads for IROs, who now report to having between 70 and 78 cases. Staff spoken to said that this helps them to provide a more effective service, for example by increasing the time spent with children before reviews to gain their views and by increasing the number of challenges raised if plans are not

progressed quickly enough.

- There is evidence of the active involvement of IROs in most of the cases looked at during the monitoring visit. However, the majority of challenges raised by IROs are focused on issues around processes rather than practice. The majority of escalations raise concern about minutes of meetings from core groups not being recorded on case files for example or of reports not being shared with parents prior to conference. Fewer escalations are raised in relation to the quality of social work practice, the experiences of children or the contribution from other professionals involved in children's plans.
- IROs are increasingly using electronic case notes to monitor and challenge progress between reviews. There is evidence on children's files of oversight and challenge about issues of compliance such as legal planning meetings not being held in a timely way and about the supervising social worker for foster carers not attending children's reviews.
- Reliable performance data is available and is used regularly by managers to monitor and track the progress of any issues raised by IROs. Although this is having an impact, it is not yet fully effective in all cases. Inspectors saw that in a number of cases when an escalation had been raised by an IRO, it was not responded to quickly enough.
- When there is drift in children's plans or delay in tasks being completed, escalations are not always raised quickly enough by IROs. During the monitoring visit we saw cases when IROs had not challenged incomplete assessments at the point of second review and incomplete police checks on family members not being raised as an issue until 10 months following the original direction.
- When cases are stepped down from child protection planning to child in need plans, recommendations made by IROs at the time of the transfer in respect of ongoing support for children and continued monitoring of their progress are not always followed. Some cases are closed after too short a period of child in need planning and before changes and improvements have been sustained.
- When there is a significant change in a case such as a change of social worker or team manager, or where there is a change in a child's circumstances, this is not always shared with the safeguarding unit. This means that IROs do not always know about issues that could influence the progress of children's plans.
- The local authority has invested in a nationally recognised model of social work. The model has been introduced through a wide programme of training to all staff and partners. There is a high level of commitment to using the model in all aspects of practice, including child protection conferences and reviews. Staff are enthusiastic and energised by the approach. However, it is

not yet part of day-to-day planning and assessment arrangements and there is a risk that the 'parallel' processes evidenced in some cases could create unnecessary confusion, which raises the potential for missed actions and duplication. It would be helpful to explore the possibility of strengthening the transitional arrangements currently in place.

- Child protection conferences are well attended by a range of professionals who contribute and share information appropriately. However, reports to conference are not always shared with parents beforehand, which means that they are unable to fully consider or question the information provided. There is evidence that schools are sharing responsibility to improve outcomes for children. It is not clear that all partner agencies are taking an active role in progressing children's plans.
- Children's voices are not consistently well represented in conferences and reviews. Some of the materials used to gain their views do not focus on the most important issues. There is also a lack of challenge from IROs when younger children's thoughts and feelings are not given sufficient consideration in assessments and plans.
- The local authority has established a cycle of audit activity that includes individual cases and key themes. Senior managers are regularly involved in auditing cases alongside social workers; staff see this as a useful part of their development. The audits seen by inspectors generally capture issues of compliance effectively. However, the monitoring and evaluation of social work practice and the experience of individual children is less well evaluated and captured within the auditing process. Auditors do not always identify all areas for improvement or apply the audit grading consistently.
- Front line staff told inspectors that morale has improved. Changes brought about by senior managers have helped to upskill staff, who now feel well supported by their managers and the improved training and development opportunities made available to them.

Evaluation of progress

Following the inspection by Ofsted in 2014, the local authority recognised that in order to achieve sustainable improvement they needed to focus on a number of key outcomes. Inspectors found that progress has been made to improve the effectiveness of the safeguarding unit.

Caseloads have now reduced; this has assisted child protection chairs and IROs to have an increased influence in cases. There is evidence of their increased scrutiny in the majority of cases seen. Strengthened auditing processes have resulted in increased levels of oversight and this is beginning to impact on practice.

The tracking of cases escalated due to concerns helps managers to monitor whether directions have been actioned and completed. The introduction of a recognised social work model has energised staff, who are beginning to use the approach to work in a more balanced, child-centred way.

Conferences and reviews are well attended and supported by partner agencies that share information and take appropriate responsibility for completing tasks in children's plans.

The progress identified on this visit is the result of managers and staff actions to improve services and raise staff morale.

Leaders and managers are aware of the areas of practice that need further improvement. These include: focusing the safeguarding unit on improving the quality of practice as well as compliance; strengthening the challenge from the safeguarding unit when children are not listened to or involved sufficiently in decisions made about them; ensuring that all agencies provide reports to conferences and that these are shared with families beforehand; ensuring that all relevant agencies take an active role in progressing children's plans.

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