

11 August 2017

Ms Colette O'Brien
Director, Children and Young People's Services
Liverpool City Council
Municipal Buildings
Dale Street
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Dear Ms O'Brien

Monitoring visit of Liverpool City Council local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Liverpool City Council local authority children's services on 12 and 13 July 2017. This was the third monitoring visit since the joint targeted area inspection (JTAI) of the multi-agency response to abuse and neglect in June 2016 that found evidence of serious and widespread deficits across the partnership. The inspectors were Nigel Parkes HMI and Pauline Higham HMI.

Senior managers are doing many of the right things, some of them well. However, progress in raising core practice standards is slow.

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the areas of:

- leadership and management; in particular, how effective senior managers are in using performance management information and quality assurance systems to understand how well children and young people are being helped and protected
- help and protection, with a particular focus on how effective frontline teams are in identifying, managing and reducing risks
- the effectiveness of the local authority's response to missing children and/or those who are, or are at risk of, being sexually exploited.

During the monitoring visit, inspectors tracked and sampled a number of children and young people's cases. As well as speaking to social workers and managers, inspectors considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, minutes of meetings, management reports, tracking tools, case audits and improvement plans.

Overview

The local authority has rectified many of the failings that were identified at the time of the JTAI. The response to children who go missing, and/or are at risk of being sexually exploited, is more robust. Performance management information has improved. Senior managers have a better understanding and overview of frontline practice and performance. Referral pathways, particularly at the 'front door', have been streamlined. Strategy meetings are being used effectively to share information and to explore risks.

Other areas of social work practice seen on this visit are weaker. The performance management framework is still a work in progress. Although case management audits are starting to shape practice, other elements of the quality assurance system are not yet fully developed. Senior managers are implementing the improvement plan, but they are not rigorously focusing on those important issues and areas that are likely to have the most impact. Social workers' assessments are not analytical enough. Management oversight is not always effective. Child protection conference chairs do not provide the right level of critical challenge. The quality of child protection plans is still very variable.

Findings and evaluation of progress

1. Leadership and management

The development of early help services and the move to integrated early help hubs are having an impact. The number of early help assessments completed by health visitors has increased because of better awareness of the early help assessment process. Senior managers are making a significant contribution to the development of a city-wide response to criminal exploitation.

The performance and management information summary report is still a work in progress. It gives a clearer picture of the experience and progress of children and young people. This includes children who are missing from home, school or care. The commentary provided is descriptive rather than analytical, which limits its usefulness. Recognising this, senior managers are about to recruit and appoint a senior data analyst.

Case management audits are being carried out on a regular basis. The results are shared with social workers and their managers. Audit findings are disseminated through team meetings. Inspectors have seen positive examples of some social workers taking on board critical feedback, reflecting on and changing their practice in a way that benefits the children they are working with. However, some auditors focus too much on processes and compliance at the expense of impact or outcomes. Others are too tentative in the way in which they describe their findings. This lessens the impact of the learning from audits.

Frontline management oversight is not consistently robust or effective. In five of the six tracked cases, management oversight required improvement to be good. This mirrors the findings of the local authority's own case management audits. Managers' and supervisors' comments recorded on case files generally include too much narrative detail. There is not enough critical analysis or case direction to be useful to social workers or to improve practice. Some do not provide any added value.

Senior managers are visible and active in promoting service improvement, but they need to be more sharply focused on the core business and on those issues that will have the biggest impact. These include the clarity of social workers' analyses, the effectiveness of management oversight and the quality of child protection plans. Failure to sort out the 'basics' is undermining the positive work that is being done in other areas of the service and so is reducing its impact.

2. Identification, assessment and reduction of risks

Case summaries are clear and concise. They record the background, reason for current involvement and status of each case. Social workers know the children and families they work with. Inspectors saw examples of social work practice that was well targeted and effective.

However, social workers do not routinely do direct work with children. The voice of the child is not clearly recorded in case files. Chronologies, which are automatically generated by the electronic case recording system, are poor. They do not provide a coherent picture of children's histories or key events in their lives.

Partner agencies engage well with, and contribute effectively to, strategy meetings and discussions. Attendance at core groups and child protection conferences is generally good. In most cases, partners share information well. This helps to ensure that action to safeguard and protect children is proportionate.

The quality of child protection plans is still very variable. Some plans are very good, making it clear who needs to do what and by when. However, social workers are often hampered by plans that lack focus. This means that plans are not always easy for parents to understand or for professionals to use.

Child protection conference chairs are not consistently providing the right level of critical challenge. Some appear to be risk averse and/or over-influenced by other professionals. The approach to the implementation of Signs of Safety has been piecemeal and unstructured. For it to be effective, there needs to be a more systemic approach.

Some families who would benefit from having a family group conference have to wait a long time for this to happen. This means that some families do not have the chance to try to sort out their difficulties before problems get worse. This also has the potential to create delays in legal planning processes.

3. Child sexual exploitation and missing

The local authority has invested significant extra resources in the Protect team. For those with whom the team works, this is having a demonstrable impact. Risks, vulnerability scores and missing episodes are reduced. The Protect team is also having a positive impact in improving outcomes. A high proportion of young people behave better and feel safer as a result of their involvement with the Protect team.

The strategic multi-agency child exploitation (MACE) group provides effective strategic oversight. Robust reporting arrangements are in place. Daily multi-agency child sexual exploitation (MACSE) meetings inform the work of the MACE. Partners talk positively about the impact of the MACE on them and on their organisations' practice. Jointly chaired by children's social care and the police, the MACE is raising awareness of criminal exploitation and gangs across Merseyside. The local authority is working hard with the police to combat the criminal exploitation of children.

Social workers are making good use of the latest screening tool to identify young people who are at risk of being exploited. Partners use the information and intelligence gathered to target suspicious individuals and/or groups.

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

Yours sincerely

Nigel Parkes
Her Majesty's Inspector