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Dear Paul

### **Focused visit to Manchester local authority children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Manchester children's services on 10 and 11 December 2019. The inspectors were Mandy Nightingale, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Diane Partridge, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for providing help and protection for children in need and those subject to a child protection plan. Inspectors considered step-up/step-down arrangements between children in need and child protection, the application of thresholds, children subject to letters before proceedings and arrangements for the protection of disabled children.

Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers and team managers. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information, workforce development and children's case records.

### **Overview**

This focused visit found that Manchester local authority has a strong and established leadership team that is supported by political and corporate leaders. Effective and collaborative partnership working has supported the implementation of several significant changes and continuously monitors the impact of these changes on children's lived experiences.

The revised quality assurance arrangements now provide a framework to systematically monitor practice improvement. This information is used widely to support strategic planning, and learning and development for staff. Leaders and managers have acted swiftly when changes are identified. An example of this was when performance in relation to the retention of staff highlighted an increased

number of staff leaving the local authority after two years; prompt action was taken to review the recruitment and retention strategy and a new proposal has been approved by senior managers.

The local authority's 'Our Manchester – Our Children' strategy is clearly articulated and understood by social workers, managers and partners. The local authority's chosen practice model is well embedded within the workforce and across the partnership, and this is evidenced by a consistent use of shared language in referrals for children and in children's records.

The local authority's self-assessment, completed in October 2019, provides examples of how progress has been made against most of the areas identified for improvement at the previous inspection. Senior leaders are appropriately aware that some practice requires further strengthening. Inspectors identified that there is more to do to improve the quality of some practice, including analysis of children's needs and circumstances within assessments.

### **What needs to improve in this area of social work practice**

- The critical analysis of information available to social workers when completing an assessment of children's needs and using this to inform further involvement.
- The quality of children's written records, including:
  - the child's written plan
  - the rationale for decision-making
  - the records of social workers' supervision
  - the purpose of visits and next steps.
- Letters for parents before proceedings are written in a style that is clear about the process and expectations for parents and are not unnecessarily authoritative in their tone.

### **Findings**

- Leaders and managers know both the areas of strengths and the areas for improvement in their service. They have the support of political and corporate leaders and have worked collaboratively with local partners to develop, implement and monitor a well-thought-through plan to improve practice and children's lived experiences. Leaders and managers are realistic in their understanding that the transition to a locality-based delivery model and sustaining improvements to practice and the lived experience of children are long-term commitments.
- A strengthened quality assurance framework means that leaders and managers are better able to systematically monitor practice improvements. The learning from quality assurance activity informs strategic planning for service delivery. It

also supports a continued focus on enhancing the skills of social workers alongside the effective workforce development strategy.

- Leaders quickly respond to information and concerns highlighted through performance management and quality assurance activity. Leaders have successfully obtained the support of senior leaders to develop and implement an enhanced retention strategy. The 'Our Manchester – Our children' strategy includes the expected principles, approach, behaviours and impact on services for children, and is city-wide. This ambitious strategy forms the basis for the local authority's move to a locality service delivery. Managers and social workers understand the 'golden thread' and what this means for practice and the impact on children's experiences. A practice model that focuses on effective relationships is well embedded in children's services and other statutory and universal services. This means that there is an increasing use of shared language and that children are at the forefront of all intervention and planning.
- Social workers see the children who they are working with when it is right for the child. They know them well and clearly articulate children's experiences, needs and the planning that is in place for children.
- Assessments of children's needs are mostly timely, detailed in the description of what is happening and clearly set out 'worries' and 'what is working well'. When assessments of children's needs are good, they explore the child's history and the impact on their lived experience. However, for a small number of children they do not always fully explore their previous experiences and are not always updated when a child's circumstances change. Too many assessments of children's needs and circumstances lack a critical analysis of the information gathered and the impact of this on children, their families and planning for future interventions.
- The needs of children with a disability are thoroughly assessed and, where necessary, child in need or child protection plans are in place. The local authority has a specific city-wide child with disabilities team. However, not all children with a profound disability are supported by this specialist service, and it was not possible to evidence how senior managers are ensuring equity of provision for this group of vulnerable children. Social workers and team managers told inspectors that they are not aware of the criteria for transferring children's case management to the specialist children with disabilities team.
- When children live in households with lots of brothers and sisters, their individual needs are considered as part of the child and family assessment. However, this could be strengthened through more in-depth exploration and consideration of what it is like for the child to live in their household.
- Children's written plans require significant input to ensure that they are succinct, clearly written and understandable for parents, children and other professionals. Too many plans include actions that are process-led, too generic, lack realistic timescales and use too much social work jargon. This means that families and

professionals may not always be clear about what is expected of them, why they need to change or when change is expected to happen. Too many children's plans focus on the actions required of the social worker and the parent/s and do not provide a sufficient understanding of the multi-agency responsibility to contribute to effective child in need or child protection planning. This makes it difficult for professionals and families to review progress and the impact of their work on children's experiences. For a small number of children, this has caused some unnecessary delay in achieving positive change.

- The letters sent to parents to initiate pre-proceedings work are not written in a way that promotes the local authority's relationship-based approach to work alongside families. The language used in the letters is too complex and at times overly authoritative. The letters do not include what previous support the family has received and any analysis of the impact of this work.
- Partnership working is a strength. Professionals share information well to inform assessments of children's needs and review meetings, and they engage in key decision-making to manage and reduce risks for children.
- Child in need meetings, core group meetings and review child protection conferences take place regularly and are well attended by partners. The recording of review meetings does not always clearly identify where progress has been made or when plans need to change. For some children, their plans become too long. This means that it is difficult for children, parents and professionals to identify and understand what actions need to be prioritised or to easily recognise where they have made progress and where children's experiences have improved.
- For most children, the threshold for intervention is reviewed when their circumstances change. For example, when risks increase, or do not decrease, within a child's timescale, then progression to child protection or to initiate pre-proceedings planning is swiftly taken. Likewise, when changes occur that reduce the risks to children, decisions to cease pre-proceedings work or child protection plans are also progressed appropriately.
- When managers or child protection conference chairs record their decisions for children, the rationale is not always fully included. An example of this is the template for recording decisions at a child's review child protection case conference, as it is not always clear why the decision to continue or cease a child protection plan has been made. This means that children accessing their records will not be able to fully understand why professionals have made decisions about their lives.
- Social workers engage well with children and use a significant range of useful tools and professional support to help them create innovative and effective ways of working with them. This means that children are supported to share their stories and their wishes and feelings, helping social workers to understand their lived experiences.

- Social workers have a good awareness of the diversity in the communities they work with and conscientiously ensure that they understand and support cultural differences. The diversity of the social work workforce and ease of access to specialist services mean that social workers can gain a more holistic understanding of cultural diversity in Manchester.
- The complex safeguarding hub in Manchester is a strength. The co-location of multi-agency partners and the effective communication and sharing of information and intelligence lead to good-quality assessment, decision-making and planning for children who are, or may be, at risk of significant harm. Children benefit from enduring and trusting relationships with professionals who work creatively to increase their safety and, for some children, to reduce their risks.
- There is a clear management footprint on children's written case records. Supervision is regular and highly valued. Social workers told us that the reflective discussions they have with their managers help them to plan for children. However, the written supervision records do not always reflect this. When reflective discussions are recorded, this helps social workers to understand the management oversight and direction.
- Social workers like working in Manchester; they report accessible and good management support and access to appropriate learning and development. The morale of the staff seen during this visit is good.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning your next inspection or visit.

Yours sincerely

Mandy Nightingale  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**