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Ms Colette Dutton  
Executive Director (Children)  
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Dear Ms Dutton

### **Focused visit to Knowsley council children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Knowsley council children's services on 21 and 22 January 2020. The inspectors were Paula Thomson-Jones, Her Majesty's Inspector, HMI Neil Penswick, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Kathryn Grindrod, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need of help and protection, and specifically those who are being supported by child in need and child protection planning. They also considered children who are identified as living in private fostering arrangements.

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

### **Overview**

Knowsley children's services were last inspected by Ofsted in 2017 and were judged to require improvement to be good. A focused visit took place in October 2018, which specifically considered the quality of work in the multi-agency front door. The letter following that visit stated that progress 'has been sustained and built on'.

Although the local authority has continued with developments since that visit, the pace of this work has been slow and has not had a significant impact on the overall quality of practice. The quality of work with children in need and children subject to child protection planning seen during this visit was very similar to that reported on during the inspection in 2017.

For the majority of children, assessments are of good quality and lead to intervention that helps them. However, there continue to be some children whose needs are not well understood and for whom care planning is not effective and does not lead to timely improvement of their circumstances.

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

- The quality of child in need and child protection plans to ensure that they help professionals to measure progress for children.
- The work done to assess and approve the suitability of private fostering arrangements and identify when children need alternative permanence planning.
- The consistency and quality of audits so that they provide learning that can support improvement in social work practice.

### **Findings**

- For the vast majority of children seen during this visit, social workers were spending time and building relationships with children and their families. This had a positive impact on many children's lives, with their parents accepting support and making changes that improved their situations. Some direct work is undertaken with most children, but this is often limited and is not always purposeful. As a result, the impact on assessment and care planning is not always clear.
- Assessments are timely in relation to the needs of children and cover key issues, including the wishes and feelings of children. The majority contain good-quality historical information, and lead to effective analysis and recommendations. Most children have their assessments routinely updated to support evaluation of progress or impact. This is an improvement since the last inspection.
- A minority of assessments are weaker, and this leads to poor planning and intervention for some children and means that their situations are not always improving quickly enough. Weaker assessments often list historical information, but do not go on to explore this in the assessment or include it in analysis, instead only focusing on the immediate presenting issue. Significant is the lack of information or analysis of the absent parent, or of other adult males living in the home. This leaves aspects of children's lives not fully understood and results in insufficient analysis of parenting capacity and gaps in care planning.

- Children and their families are provided with a range of appropriate support and services during the period of assessment. All children have a written plan with some outcomes and actions identified, and these are regularly reviewed and updated. However, plans do not consistently include measurable outcomes and timescales. When plans are reviewed, there is often too much focus on the compliance of parents with tasks, rather than on an evaluation of progress or impact for children.
- For some children, the plans of support do not improve their lives. This is often recognised and recorded, but little action is taken to change the approach. Professionals are too slow to re-evaluate children's situations or consider alternative approaches. Effective contingency plans are rarely in place, and this leads to professionals continuing with ineffective plans, or advocating for a higher level of statutory intervention without considering how the intervention itself needs to change.
- For most children, multi-agency meetings are attended by their parents or carers. Children's views are usually well represented, and some children attend their meetings and contribute to their planning. Attendance of partners at core groups and child in need meetings is inconsistent. In many cases, representatives from partner agencies working with families do not attend consistently, leading to gaps in information-sharing and a lack of coherent review of progress.
- There is evidence that, for most children, managers have oversight of the work done with them through discussions in regular formal supervision. However, this does not ensure that the quality of work with children is consistently good, or that plans are improving situations for children. There is little evidence of managers, or independent child protection chairs, intervening to ensure timely progress for children. As a result, some children's circumstances do not improve despite long-term intervention.
- Changes in management oversight of private fostering arrangements that have been put in place since the most recent inspection have not led to an improvement to the quality of practice. Timely completion of basic checks of private foster carers is not evidenced on children's records, potentially leaving children at unknown risk. The assessments of private foster carers do not consider their abilities and suitability well enough or lead to clear and timely permanence plans for children.
- Audit activity is undertaken regularly and the tools and processes of audit, including some feedback from families, are in place and understood. However, audit quality is not consistent and the view of what constitutes good is not aspirational enough for children. The majority of audits do not result in learning for social workers, or support improvements in their practice. In many cases, there is too much focus on the completion of tasks rather than on the quality of

work. In addition, moderation is ineffective and does not enhance the audit process. The local authority was already aware of these deficits and commissioned a peer review to fully understand the weaknesses. This review was completed in October 2019, and the local authority is currently implementing change to address these shortfalls.

- Knowsley has an enthusiastic and stable workforce. Social workers feel that the local authority is supportive and well structured, and that there is easy access to senior managers. Staff have good access to training and development opportunities. Over the last 12 months, this has included a programme of training to enable the introduction of a new model of practice. For some workers, there is evidence of the approach having some impact on their thinking and work with families, but this is not yet consistent across all workers and teams.
- Newly qualified social workers are well supported, and their workloads are protected. For other, more experienced, staff, caseloads are often too high to allow them enough time to deliver consistently good-quality practice. In addition, team managers have large spans of control, which impacts on their ability to ensure effective monitoring of the quality of all work with children. There is also a lack of capacity at senior management level, with existing managers trying to cover too many roles. Although this situation has existed for some time, action has only recently been taken, with an additional head of service post now created alongside some additional capacity to improve quality assurance activity.
- Senior leaders have ensured that previous progress to improve the experiences of children has been maintained and they have taken some steps to enable further improvement. However, they have been slow to recognise and respond to weaknesses in quality assurance and the impact of a lack of capacity at senior leadership level. This has meant that services considered within the scope of this visit have not improved at the same pace as was observed at previous inspections and visits.

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

Yours sincerely

Paula Thomson-Jones

**Her Majesty's Inspector**