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Jayne Ivory  
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Dear Jayne Ivory

### **Focused visit to Blackburn with Darwen children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Blackburn with Darwen children's services on 19 February 2020. The inspectors were Paula Thomson-Jones, Her Majesty's Inspector and Kathryn Grindrod, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for decision-making for children who come into care and the quality of early care planning and placements.

Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers in the assessment and support teams. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.

### **Overview**

Senior leaders understand the strengths and areas for development within the service. While there have been improvements in some areas of service, progress remains slow in key areas of weakness that were identified at previous inspections.

Leaders have recognised that, despite the local authority being judged to be good overall at the last inspection, there is significant work to do to ensure that this is sustained. As part of their plans for practice improvement, a new quality assurance framework has been introduced. This has led to an increase in the range of audit activity to support a greater understanding of practice. However, most audits remain focused on compliance and do not evaluate children's experiences.

When children are at immediate or significant risk, decisions to bring them into care are made promptly and appropriately. However, decision-making when children are suffering neglect is too slow. This means that some children are left in harmful situations and plans for their future are delayed.

Social work caseloads are too high in the assessment and support teams, which impacts on social workers' ability to build relationships with children and understand their experiences. Although leaders have acted to try and reduce demand for social work services, this has not had any impact on workloads in these social work teams. At the point of this visit, effective interim plans to address workload pressures were not in place.

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

- Caseloads in the assessment and support teams to enable social workers to build meaningful relationships with children and deliver good-quality social work practice.
- The quality of assessments and plans for children.
- Management oversight, including that by independent reviewing officers (IROs), to ensure that there is challenge to drift in care planning, and support for practice improvements.
- The quality of audits so that they support the evaluation of social work practice and its impact on children.

### **Findings**

- When children are at immediate risk, for example if they have been physically harmed, decisions for them to come into care are taken appropriately and quickly. Timely, good quality pre-birth assessments lead to appropriate decisions being made for unborn children, and these protect them from birth.
- The response to children experiencing neglect is not always prompt or effective. This means that some children are being left in harmful situations for too long and often come into care in an emergency as the result of further significant incidents within their home. This means that some children then experience changes in placement, and delay in effective planning for permanence. This was identified by Ofsted as an area for improvement at the last inspection in 2017 and at the previous focused visit in 2018.
- Family group conferences are routinely used to support children and families to prevent children coming into care or to identify alternative family carers. As a result, many children who come into care can live within their extended family network. These carers are appropriately assessed and supported to ensure that children's needs are met.

- There have been improvements in the process for making decisions about children coming into care. A regular panel now ensures consistency of approach and application of thresholds. This is not always well recorded on children's case files, and it would be difficult for some children to understand the reason that the decision was made for them to come into care should they read their records later.
- When children need to come into care, the local authority undertakes family finding using a matching process based on children's needs. This leads to most children being placed appropriately with carers who can meet their needs. The reasons for carers being matched with children are not well recorded.
- Many initial placement plans and care plans are poorly completed, and do not provide carers with the information they need to look after children. This had already been identified by the local authority as part of their quality assurance activity prior to this visit, and there is a plan in place to support improvements.
- Children in care have their needs met and their circumstances do improve. A wide range of effective services are available from a range of partner agencies, and this supports carers to meet children's needs.
- Most children live with their brothers and sisters when it is in their best interests. They have regular family time with their parents and other family members, which is supervised and supported appropriately by the local authority when needed.
- In most of the cases seen, there is timely planning for permanence at the first review. For a minority of children, this was not achieved because the review focused too much on work with parents and the progression of court processes.
- Social workers can talk about the children they support, and they understand their wishes and feelings. Their workloads mean that they often rely on other professionals to gather this information as they are not able to spend as much time with children as they would wish to. Some children experience several changes in social worker, and this prevents the development of a meaningful relationship.
- Caseloads of social workers remain too high, including for newly qualified workers, who do not currently have appropriately protected caseloads or enough time to learn and develop. Since the last focused visit, senior leaders have undertaken a significant restructuring of the front door to children's social care, which is starting to reduce work in the service. The local authority reports that this is starting to have an impact on the workloads in referral and assessment teams. However, they estimate that it may take a further nine months to impact on workloads in social work teams. The interim plans to reduce caseloads do not sufficiently address these issues, and high workloads remain a significant barrier

to improving the quality and consistency of social work practice. Senior leaders committed to taking further action to address this during the visit.

- Social worker supervision happens regularly, but does not always have an impact on preventing drift for children experiencing neglect. Independent reviewing officers regularly review work with children, but this does not consistently lead to improved practice or ensure that care plans progress in a timely way.
- A new framework for quality assurance was launched in November 2019. This is intended to support a change in culture towards continuous practice improvement, with use of a range of methods to gain feedback. An initial practice week accurately identified some areas for improvement. This has led to further audit activity to evaluate the weaknesses in these areas of practice. Audits remain too focused on compliance, and this reduces their effectiveness in supporting improvement in the quality and consistency of social work practice.
- Social workers report that managers and senior leaders are supportive and accessible and that they receive good support from their colleagues. A wide variety of training is available for social workers and managers, and this has had some positive impact on the work completed with children, for example increasing the use of direct work.

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**