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Dear Mr Jones

Focused visit to Oldham children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Oldham local authority children's services between 13 October and 15 October 2020. The visit was carried out by Her Majesty's Inspectors Lorna Schlechte, Brenda McInerney, Lisa Summers, Kathryn Grindrod and Tim Hill.

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic.

The methodology for this visit was in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. However, the delivery model was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 context. This visit was carried out fully by remote means. Inspectors used video calls for discussions with local authority social workers, managers and leaders. The lead inspector and the director of children's services agreed arrangements to deliver this visit effectively while working within national and local guidelines for responding to COVID-19 and meeting the needs of the local authority's workforce.

Overview

Oldham has been impacted by a persistently high, and rising, rate of COVID-19 infection since March 2020. The council reports that the pandemic presented a significant risk to public health in a diverse community where there is a strong correlation between infection rates, high-density housing and areas of deprivation. Senior leaders and partners have responded swiftly and effectively to these challenges, adopting a whole-system approach to ensure that a wide-ranging level of support is provided to the most vulnerable families. The impact of COVID-19 restrictions in particular communities has been acutely understood, from the early

days of full lockdown, to the more recent additional restrictions implemented in July. This has ensured that appropriately targeted support is directed to those most in need.

Strong collaborative work with schools, health and the voluntary sector has been galvanised during the pandemic. This has successfully supported prioritisation of the areas of greatest need and the best possible decision-making for children. Children continue to be safeguarded and help has been provided through the establishment of five community hubs, to avoid families falling into food poverty. A major incident command structure led to daily 'bronze' partnership meetings to ensure that vulnerable children were identified and risk-assessed during a time of great uncertainty.

Senior leaders have maintained as much face-to-face contact with vulnerable children as possible during the pandemic, which ensures that children are seen regularly. A system was rapidly established to risk-assess and monitor all vulnerable children. After an initial dip in referrals in April, the level of demand increased to pre-pandemic levels, as a result of effective work with partners and the community to ensure that concerns about children are referred appropriately.

Social work teams were promptly reconfigured into 'bubbles' to promote a COVID-19-secure working environment, with personal protective equipment (PPE) readily available. This ensured that children continued to receive a strong level of support from social workers and other professionals to protect them, while plans were progressed in relation to their individual needs for care and education. The local authority has used a small number of flexibilities to the regulations during the pandemic and has maintained a clear account of these.

In December 2019, a new senior leadership team was established. It has maintained a sharp focus on improvement priorities during the last six months, supported by the continued corporate and political commitment to protect frontline services. This has increased the pace of improvement and made a positive impact to shift cultural practice since the last inspection. Senior leaders understand that there is much work to do to embed consistently strong social work practice. New practice standards have been implemented, the complex safeguarding hub has been developed and auditing of practice has continued at pace. Inspectors found three areas for improvement in social work practice. These issues are recognised by senior managers, who acknowledge that a more robust approach is needed to support consistency of practice.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- Partner attendance at key decision-making meetings.
- Recording of rationale for next steps in strategy meetings.
- Quality of oversight and challenge from child protection chairs, including when children step down from child protection plans.

Findings

- Decision-making in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) is mostly responsive and timely. Management oversight has been strengthened to determine next steps and thresholds are mostly appropriate. The MASH adapted quickly to reconfigure its arrangements, working mostly from an on-site bubble with partners. Increased capacity was provided in response to anticipated demand when schools returned in September. The co-location of partners with an on-site duty assessment team improved levels of communication. Daily risk meetings continued to respond to the most vulnerable children and families, including the needs of missing and exploited children.
- The interface between early help and children's social care is not joined up efficiently. There is duplication of effort, as screening is reliant on both electronic and manual records. This makes information-gathering more difficult as systems do not talk to each other effectively. There are plans to improve systems and processes in the coming months, to ensure a more streamlined approach to decision-making when cases step up and down between early help and children's social care.
- When children need immediate protection, they receive a swift response and appropriate decisions are made to escalate to child protection investigations. Health attendance at strategy meetings has reduced during the pandemic, as staff have been redeployed elsewhere, and this has limited the richness of information-sharing. The recording of strategy meetings does not sufficiently detail children's history or the rationale for decisions and actions to protect them.
- Assessments of need are mostly holistic and include management oversight to inform the analysis of risk and decision-making. Children's views are included, although sometimes they lack consideration of the impact of life for that child. Despite COVID-19 restrictions, social workers and support staff meet up outside of the home to ensure that children are seen alone, when this is safe to do so. There is some creative work with children and families to ascertain their wishes and feelings. For example, intensive work by the complex safeguarding hub and the assessment support unit has led to effective work to improve parental capacity to protect and to help young people to make better choices.
- Although children's plans are detailed and reviewed regularly and there is improving management oversight, there is sometimes drift due to changes of social worker, the inconsistent quality of contingency planning and a lack of challenge by conference chairs. Supervision does not always provide the focused case direction required to support the social worker when progress of children's plans is too slow.
- When risk to children who are subject to child in need plans increases, decisions to progress to initial child protection conferences are mostly timely and appropriate. However, there is an over-optimistic view of parental engagement and parents' capacity to sustain change, which has led to some children coming off child protection plans too soon. Senior leaders are aware of this issue from auditing

work undertaken over the summer. This has led to recently implemented plans to scrutinise decision-making more closely. This includes the role of conference chairs to challenge and provide a clearer rationale for step down decisions, and the effectiveness of core groups to measure progress.

- Decisions to support children who are at high risk of exploitation benefit from well-coordinated, multi-agency support within the new complex safeguarding hub established in recent months. Skilled staff produce comprehensive risk assessments which appropriately inform decision-making to protect children and young people. Support is tailored and carefully paced to the individual needs of young people.
- When children's circumstances do not improve, timely authoritative action is now taken to initiate the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline and court proceedings. Senior leaders have recently strengthened their approach and now robustly monitor children's progress to minimise delay. Delays are sometimes purposeful to test that change is being sustained, although other delays have been due to the late completion of expert assessments as a result of COVID-19. Most letters before proceedings clearly define concerns, the support provided to the family and identify next steps to prevent court proceedings being initiated.
- There has been a significant rise in the number of pupils being electively home educated (EHE) over the last 12 months, and this has been exacerbated by the pandemic. However, appropriate systems identify and monitor pupils who are EHE. This includes carrying out additional checks of vulnerable pupils to help safeguard their welfare. Children missing from education are tracked appropriately, although two systems run in parallel and need some refinement to speed up the progress and oversight of individual cases.
- Decisions to accommodate children are appropriate but not always timely due to limited contingency planning when risk does not reduce. The adolescent support unit provides respite and planned programmes of intensive support with some young people on the edge of care, although senior leaders are aware that there is more to do to develop this area of work.
- When children come into care, there is good management oversight at the first review and early case tracking by independent reviewing officers (IROs) which is beginning to inform decisions about early permanence. New permanence panels and updated social work assessments are better informing placement decisions. The majority of children live in stable placements in borough. There is evidence of culturally appropriate matching decisions, which ensures that the religious and cultural needs of children are carefully considered. Although placement disruptions are few, the learning from disruptions does not sufficiently inform individual needs for permanence or broader service considerations.
- The additional support and training provided to foster carers has supported placement stability during the pandemic. This has included a programme of virtual resilience workshops by Healthy Young Minds, extended due to their popularity and effectiveness. Carers are positive about the support children in care receive from their social workers, who have maintained regular face-to-face visits and

virtual contact as appropriate. Social workers are determinedly child-focused and visits to children are flexible, regular and purposeful. Changes in family circumstances are routinely explored prior to visits, although this is not always visible on the child's record.

- The virtual school adapted to the challenges presented by the pandemic, working in partnership with local schools to provide appropriate support to children. Personal education plan reviews have taken place as planned, albeit virtually.
- The strategic response to the complex emotional and mental health needs of children and young people during the pandemic has been particularly strong. Services are responsive, flexible and based on a clear understanding of the changing needs of children and families during the pandemic. Support for young people's mental health and well-being in school has been bolstered by the responsive work of health partners.
- Reviews for children in care and care leavers are child-focused and appropriately inform planning arrangements. Children are provided with sensitive explanations as to why they are in care and what is going to happen next. Contact with families has been facilitated sensitively throughout national and local restrictions. The children in care council continues to represent the voice of children and care leavers, has maintained progress since the last inspection and reports positively on the work of social workers and personal assistants (PAs).
- Decisions for children to return home are made when this is in their best interests, with appropriate oversight of decisions by the IRO. Although some timescales have slipped due to changes in parental circumstances and COVID-19-related court delays, there is a concerted focus on progressing the discharge of care orders. As a result, a third of these cases are now in the process of being discharged for the high number of children placed at home.
- Care leavers benefit from regular contact with their PAs and have been helped to stay in touch with the provision of laptops, food parcels and 'goody bags'. Some vulnerable care leavers with complex needs receive very effective multi-agency working to secure the right resource, accommodation and support. The offer for care leavers is being strengthened to reduce the likelihood of students becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training) and this is starting to make a difference. Some care leavers have been furloughed or made redundant due to COVID-19, but there is appropriate council support at such a difficult time, such as employability schemes, free bus passes and help to access further education.
- The new senior leadership team has supported a robust response to COVID-19 and service improvements have been well coordinated and have gathered pace. Senior leaders have adapted quickly to maintain social work services, respond to the needs of the most vulnerable children and maintained a sharp focus on the improvement journey. This balance has been achieved through close collaboration with a range of strategic partners, listening to staff suggestions and keeping a clear line of sight to frontline services.
- Senior leaders have emphasised the importance of 'getting the basics right'; they are ambitious for children and have continued to develop services, including

practice standards. Auditing has continued at pace throughout the last six months and performance management data is targeted appropriately, although the moderation within audits is not well recorded. This is beginning to support improvements in the quality of practice through more focused learning and sharing of good practice.

- Social workers report positively about recent changes in senior leadership and appreciate the new forums and opportunities created to share good practice. Caseloads are sometimes too high for some workers and need to reduce, although social workers report that they are manageable. This is due, partly, to a supportive team environment, visible and supportive managers and regular supervision. There is good access to PPE, and care has been taken to maintain a balance of secure office space and working-from-home arrangements, depending on individual circumstances.
- Partners report positively on the approach of senior leaders and express confidence in their decision-making. The use of flexibilities has been minimal and appropriately used; for example, the extension of an emergency foster placement for up to 24 weeks, flexibility in the quoracy of one adoption panel and progression of adopters from Stage 1 to Stage 2 without a medical, to enable assessments to continue and children to be placed.

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

Yours sincerely

Lorna Schlechte
Her Majesty's Inspector