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Dear Jim

Focused visit to St Helens children's services

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.

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to St Helens children's services on 19 and 20 May 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors were Mandy Nightingale, Andy Waugh, Julie Knight, Neil Penswick and Garry White.

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 staff, carers, key stakeholders and young people. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records. 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.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The quality of decision-making to progress plans for children within the pre-proceedings element of the Public Law Outline, and the management oversight of this.
- The quality and effectiveness of the case audit activity to inform leaders of the impact of social work interventions on children's progress and lived experience.

- The balance of social workers' workloads and the prioritisation of tasks by social workers and managers to avoid any unnecessary drift and delay for children in need of support, help and protection.

Findings

- Throughout the pandemic, Merseyside, and St Helens within it, has mostly been categorised as a high-risk area and subject to some of the tightest of lockdown restrictions. The local authority strengthened its relationship with education providers and, together, they have been effective in ensuring that vulnerable children attend school. Senior leaders have also provided effective oversight of those children who are missing education and who are electively home educated. Partner agencies in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) adapted well to the different ways of working and are continuing to provide a timely and effective response to children who are in need or at risk of harm. Regularly reviewed COVID-19 risk assessments, for children known to children's social care, inform social workers' planning when visiting children and their families. There has been a hybrid to visits, including garden/home visits and use of social media. Senior leaders have responded well to the complexities faced by the workforce during the pandemic and provided additional communication opportunities and resources to support staff well-being.
- Multi-agency professionals who work as part of the MASH have developed effective systems to work collaboratively in a virtual world and this is supporting effective decisions for children. Decision-making is timely, consent is appropriately sought from parents and historical information is clearly considered. Partner agencies' referrals contain information that supports the identification of need and risk. Management oversight is clear and provides direction for social workers to complete further enquiries.
- When children are identified to be at risk of significant harm, multi-agency child protection strategy meetings, and subsequent child protection enquiries, are mostly timely and proportionate to the risks identified. For a small number of children, child protection strategy meetings do not take place, although their circumstances are considered through an assessment of their needs. This means that, for some children, their needs and decisions for next steps are not being considered within a multi-agency information-sharing forum.
- The quality of the assessments of children's and families' needs is variable. Some assessments are weak because they do not use historical information to inform current concerns or include an analysis of risk, and some are incident-led and fail to give comprehensive consideration of the needs of the child and the family. These weaker assessments are less effective in informing decision-making to reduce risks for children.
- Decisions for children's cases to step up or step down between different levels of support and intervention, for example between early help, child in need and child protection, are proportionate to the presenting needs and risks to the child. These

decisions are underpinned by strong multi-agency practice and clear management oversight.

- Key multi-agency meetings are well attended by the relevant professionals, who review the child's plan effectively to progress actions and improve children's experiences. Disabled children receive a proportionate service that sensitively meets their needs.
- The local authority has worked well with partners, at both strategic and operational levels, to implement improvements in practice when there are concerns that children are at risk of, or experiencing, child exploitation and when children go missing. Most children who have been identified with these concerns receive a service that has improved their circumstances and, for some, this reduces risk.
- When circumstances do not improve for children who are experiencing abuse or neglect, decision-making for most children is timely and, when relevant, leads to a progression to the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline. However, for some children, the decision to enter pre-proceedings has been too slow. Some children within the pre-proceedings process experience unnecessary drift and delay because there is insufficient management oversight of their plans. The rationale for decision-making does not always demonstrate that the child's needs have informed these decisions. This is particularly evident when decisions are taken to extend timescales for completion of actions. Letters sent to parents when the local authority is considering care proceedings do not inform parents effectively of what needs to change to prevent this action.
- Most children come into care at a time that meets their needs and risks. However, these decisions are not always made at the right time for some children, meaning that they remain in high-risk situations for too long. The majority of children live in placements that meet their needs. Children are well supported to see their families and those important to them, and are included in discussions to review family-time arrangements. Children in the local authority's care have their physical and emotional health needs met and monitored through annual health assessments and support from their carers.
- For most children who live outside of the local authority area, support to meet their needs is effective, including regular contact with family members and key professionals, and relevant access to health services and education. Young people living in semi-independent arrangements are well supported by providers to access education, employment or training and have their day-to-day needs met.
- Social workers and personal advisors have maintained regular contact with care leavers throughout the pandemic. Young people told inspectors that they have been supported with their emotional needs and provided with equipment to continue with their education, employment or training.
- The local authority has put an effective system in place to understand and monitor the school attendance of all children during the pandemic. Daily attendance information, and a weekly review of the most vulnerable children, has enabled local authority leaders to target resources where they are most needed.

Partnership working between schools, parents and the local authority has ensured that parents have the information they need to make the decision to electively home educate their children. The local authority has strong systems in place to monitor these children and, when right for the child, have supported a return to school. Local authority leaders have challenged schools effectively on their use of part-time timetables, and this has reduced the number of children not in receipt of full-time education.

- The local authority works closely with partners to monitor and review the impact of its children's improvement plan and, in some areas, this is beginning to lead to improvements in the quality of the social work intervention that children receive. Senior leaders broadly know the areas that need to change to improve social work practice and children's experiences. This is demonstrated through the local authority's self-assessment and discussions with senior leaders during this visit. However, they were not fully aware of the drift and delay for some children subject to pre-proceedings under the Public Law Outline identified during this visit.
- The inconsistent quality of children's case file audits, and the moderation of these, is not providing effective assurance to senior leaders about the quality of practice. Auditing of social work practice focuses too much on compliance with policies and procedures and not enough on the impact that work is having on improving the child's experience.
- In the assessment service, some children are experiencing too many changes of social worker and delay in meeting their needs. This means that there is drift and delay in reducing risks for these children and in the decision-making to secure their early permanence. Senior leaders are aware of this and they plan to put measures in place to reduce social work churn and caseload pressures; however, these measures were not in place at the time of the visit.
- Social workers spoke passionately about the children they work with. They understand children's circumstances well. However, for some children, this does not always translate into progressing their plans according to their needs, or into their written records. Social workers told inspectors that they understand what needs to change in St Helens and feel included in the local authority's improvement plan.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning your next inspection or visit. I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. It will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Mandy Nightingale
Her Majesty's Inspector