

16 August 2021

Edwina Grant OBE
Executive Director, Education and Children's Services
Lancashire County Council
County Hall
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Dear Edwina,

Focused visit to Lancashire 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 Lancashire children's services on 6 and 7 July 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Paula Thomson-Jones, Lorna Schlechte and Rebecca Quested.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need, including those who are subject to a child protection plan. This visit had a particular focus on the application of thresholds and arrangements for children who are stepped up or stepped down between different thresholds of need.

This visit was carried out 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. 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. This visit was carried out remotely.

Headline findings

Thresholds are applied effectively for most children who need help and protection, leading to them receiving timely support that is provided at the appropriate level of need. Strong performance management and quality assurance and the well-organised implementation of a social work model have supported frontline staff to improve the quality of their work with children. Leaders have an accurate self-view that identifies that positive progress has been made since the last focused visit and

that improvement is still required to ensure the quality and consistency of plans, direct work with children and the supervision of frontline staff.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The quality of direct work, to ensure that it is purposeful.
- The quality and consistency of plans.
- The quality and impact of supervision and management oversight.

Headline findings

Lancashire has experienced high levels of COVID-19 throughout the pandemic and, at the time of this visit, continued to have one of the highest infection rates in the country. The local safeguarding partnership has worked effectively to maintain services and minimise the impact on vulnerable children and their families. In addition to responding to these additional challenges, senior leaders have led a coherent strategic approach to changing and improving services that has resulted in some progress. This is a noteworthy achievement, particularly given the size of the county and its workforce, and the significant and continued impact of COVID-19.

Supported by substantial investment, there has been an integration of targeted and community-based early help services to create a Children and Family Well Being Service (CFWS), and the implementation of a new practice model for children's social care. These developments are part of a wider strategy to ensure families receive help at the earliest level of need and reduce the numbers of children who require statutory intervention. Development work, such as service restructures and extensive staff training, continued throughout the pandemic, leading to the incremental implementation of new ways of working that were launched fully in February 2021.

Most children receive timely support at the right level of need. They are subject to proportionate levels of intervention and are stepped down to lower levels when this is possible and appropriate. For most children who are stepped down to CFWS, this transition is well managed and leads to effective multi-agency support to meet their needs.

Staff working in CFWS identify when their work is not having a positive impact or risk has increased and make prompt referrals to children's social care. This results in social work assessment and higher levels of intervention where this is appropriate. As a result, children and families receive more intensive support to ensure their needs are met and risk is responded to and reduced.

Many social work assessments are thorough, with effective information-gathering and analysis of needs and risk. This leads to more effective planning and positive progress for children. Where assessments are weaker, the analysis is not as effective at identifying the impact of parental behaviours or their capacity to change and this

means the lived experience of these children and the potential for their lives to improve is not well understood.

Most plans for children are appropriately focused on key concerns and what needs to change and they lead to appropriate support for children that helps them. Some are not sufficiently focused on the desired outcomes for children, and measure the completion of tasks rather than evaluating whether the work completed has really made a difference. This results in some children having plans which are not focused enough on addressing more long-term complex issues, such as the impact of living with parents who are dependent on alcohol or those who experience mental ill-health. For some children, this leads to delay in their situation improving.

Children are seen regularly by social workers and workers within CFWS who listen to them to understand their views. In the early stages of the pandemic, risk assessments were undertaken to inform whether visits should be virtual or in person. Risk was continually reassessed and the services gradually moved back to visiting almost all children face to face. This continues, despite the more recent rise in levels of COVID-19. Children are seen and spoken to regularly and some benefit from direct work that offers useful insight into their lives. For others, direct work is too brief or superficial and, as a result, planning and decision-making is not always informed by a detailed understanding of their lives.

Most children who are the subject of child protection plans are supported effectively through well-coordinated multi-agency working to address their needs. Regular core groups take place that use the plan appropriately to review progress and respond to changing needs. Some families are also benefiting from the integration of other professionals into the social work teams as part of the new model of practice. Inspectors saw that this ensures timely access to specialist individual support to respond to domestic abuse for some families. The recruitment of staff to these teams is not complete, and as a result the impact for children is limited.

When risk reduces, multi-agency review conferences make appropriate and clearly recorded decisions to end the period of child protection planning and support families at lower levels of need. All families are offered continued multi-agency support via children's social care or CFWS to address any unmet needs. However, the impact on families of stepping down to other services and having to work with a different group of professionals is not always well considered. This leads to some families who are stepped down to receive support from CFWS not getting additional help and withdrawing from the support that is offered. For a small number of children, this leads to their needs being unmet, risks increasing and further referrals into children's social care.

In most case records, there is evidence of regular management oversight and supervision. This is often task focused and does not demonstrate reflection about the quality of work taking place. This, and the lack of challenge by managers when progress is not made, does not ensure improvements for children. Social workers

report that they get regular supervision and feel well supported by their managers and that quality assurance activity is beneficial and supports their learning.

Leaders have a detailed and accurate understanding of the quality of practice and the services that are delivered. They use extensive and well-developed performance reporting and a strong quality assurance framework to maintain an effective line of sight and they respond quickly to emerging issues. Extensive routine audit activity offers a thorough examination of case records, as well as reflective conversations with workers and feedback from partners and service users. Performance data is used well to identify any potential areas of concern and triggers specific additional audit or review to understand issues and take action. All areas for development identified at this visit were already known to the local authority. Actions taken to address weaknesses, such as development of the CFWS and the implementation of the new social work model, are in their early stages and have not had sufficient impact to result in consistently good outcomes for children.

Caseloads across the social work teams have reduced and are at manageable levels. Social workers, including new social workers in the early stages of their practice, have good access to training and development and this has continued during the pandemic. Social workers were very positive about the implementation of the new practice model and of the preparation and training they had received to deliver new ways of working. Those spoken to during this visit described a positive working environment that was supporting them to improve their work with families.

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

Your sincerely

Paula Thomson-Jones
Her Majesty's Inspector