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Dear John

Focused visit to Cumbria 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 Cumbria children's services on 21 and 22 July 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Lisa Summers and Paula Thomson-Jones.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need, including those who are subject to a child protection plan.

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 executive director for people agreed arrangements to deliver this visit effectively while working within national and local guidelines for responding to COVID-19. This visit was carried out on site, with inspectors using video calls for some discussions with social workers.

Headline findings

The stable and determined leadership team has continued to improve the quality of social work practice for children since the last inspection in January 2018, when the local authority was judged requires improvement to be good. Effective quality assurance, clear expectations in practice standards and the embedding of a

recognised social work model are improving the lives of many children. Steady progress has been made in the quality of assessments and purposeful direct work with children. Management oversight to minimise drift for children has been strengthened. The local authority has not made sufficient progress in some areas identified at the last inspection in relation to the quality of social work for disabled children and the quality of plans and planning. In addition, the response to some families demonstrates that some social workers do not understand the complexities of relationships where domestic abuse is a feature.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The quality of child in need and child protection plans and planning.
- Consistency in social workers' understanding of, and response to, domestic abuse.
- The quality of social work practice for disabled children.
- The quality of supervision, to support the progression of children's plans.

Main findings

At the time of this visit, the levels of COVID-19 were continuing to increase in Cumbria. Despite the unprecedented and continued challenges to services and communities, the local authority prioritises continuity of support and provision for the most vulnerable children. Risk assessments inform frequency of visits, and children continue to be seen face to face. Multi-agency meetings, such as child protection conferences, have continued virtually. Senior managers and leaders continue to harness the benefits of virtual working to enhance their visibility as well as enabling large numbers of staff to come together for support. Social workers have appreciated the high levels of managerial support throughout the pandemic, with flexible and responsive working practices to meet their personal circumstances and the needs of children and their families.

Most children are seen regularly by social workers who know them very well. Direct work is child centred and purposeful, which is enabling a good understanding of children's experiences, wishes and feelings. Social workers use their skills to carefully guide discussions with children to review the impact of the plan or explore new concerns. Family networks are maximised to wrap additional longer-term support around children to achieve safety and stability. There is some impressive use of virtual platforms to support families and enhance the social work response when necessary.

Most assessments are detailed and coherent, and explore well history and information from a broad range of sources, including wider family members. Children contribute to their assessments, enabling social workers to understand their lives, their diverse needs and the risks they face. In the small minority of weaker

assessments, social workers focus overly on the presenting risk to the detriment of recognising children's broader needs.

The local authority reports a high prevalence of domestic abuse in Cumbria. Despite this, some social workers do not fully understand the complex nature of relationships where domestic abuse is a feature, including how risk is identified and managed. An externally commissioned review is currently underway to fully understand the impact of social workers' support for children exposed to this abuse and to shape practice improvements.

Child in need and child protection planning is not consistently strong enough to bring about timely change in improving children's lives. While plans for most children detail well the support they need and their lives improve, some are not specific enough to help parents understand what needs to change. Some plans lack timescales to inject pace, and clear contingency plans if improvements are not made.

The local authority continues to maximise the use of virtual platforms to secure regular, well-attended review meetings. These meetings do not sufficiently consider progress, reflect on what is changing for the child nor do they define timescales for actions. This is leading to actions being repeated and a delay in children's needs being met. Senior managers recognise that for some children the quality of planning is not meeting expected standards and have implemented additional senior manager reviews. It is too soon to see a noticeable impact on children's experiences.

Support for disabled children has not improved at the same pace as for those children being helped in the support and protect teams. Specifically, assessments are weaker, with limited consideration being given to history and direct work to understand children's views and wishes. Senior managers recently commissioned an independent review to test the impact of the changes they have made to these services to date. Leaders are aware that changes made to date have not resulted in sufficient progress and are reconsidering their plans to improve the quality of social work practice with disabled children.

When children's lives are not improving, most children benefit from swift authoritative decisions to escalate into the Public Law Outline (PLO). Work in pre-proceedings is effective for many children, helping families to turn their lives around and keep their child safely at home. The local authority has strengthened oversight of the PLO through the introduction of review mechanisms and tight tracking to minimise drift and delay. A dedicated legal placement panel provides effective and consistent decision-making and clear timescales for work to be completed, extending the use of PLO or stepping up to initiate proceedings when necessary.

Early identification of family networks is supporting children to live with family members when it is not safe for them to stay at home. Determined efforts are made to understand barriers preventing parental engagement, through the use of specialist assessments. Senior managers know there is more to do to sharpen the consistency

of letters before proceedings and ensure that reviews are more child focused. Work has recently started across the region to progress this.

Senior managers have a good understanding of the quality and impact of social work practice in Cumbria. Performance management is strong, well embedded and used intelligently, identifying areas requiring further scrutiny. This is enabling managers to act before difficulties escalate. Audits have been strengthened through a more sophisticated approach which is supporting a better understanding of practice, enriched by the views of families and focusing heavily on children's experiences. Collaborative auditing alongside social workers is providing an effective learning opportunity, helping practitioners reflect on the impact of their work and what needs to happen next. Remedial actions are appropriate, timebound and actioned swiftly when necessary.

Senior managers' oversight is appropriate and clear, and the rationale for decisions is detailed, providing additional direction with timescales set against actions. Supervision is regular but often lacks reflection to help social workers think about the impact of their involvement, how to resolve difficulties and identify what to do next. The local authority recognises this and has recently reviewed its policy and tools to support more reflective supervision. Additional targeted training is planned.

Social workers are very positive about working for Cumbria, reporting manageable caseloads that are regularly reviewed by managers. Social workers are highly committed to learning and improving their work, saying that training is helping them to refocus, reflect and re-energise their practice. Social workers appreciate the investment the local authority makes to their development.

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

Yours sincerely

Lisa Summers
Her Majesty's Inspector