

2 November 2021

Victoria Gent
Director of Blackpool Children's Services
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Dear Vicky

Monitoring visit to Blackpool children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Blackpool children's services on 28 and 29 September 2021. This was the third monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in January 2019. Inspectors also completed a focused assurance visit to Blackpool earlier this year. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Lorna Schlechte, Rachel Griffiths and Lisa Walsh, HMI designate.

Areas covered by this visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the following areas:

- The quality of early permanence planning.
- Children on the edge of care.
- Decision-making when children come into care.
- Children in care up to the second review.
- The impact of leaders and managers.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. This visit was carried out fully on site. Inspectors also used telephone calls for discussions with children, carers, improvement partners and agencies.

Headline findings

Blackpool is making some steady progress, specifically in relation to the impact of recent service improvements designed to support vulnerable families and reduce the high numbers of children in care. Permanence panels have been introduced to overview children's progress, and this has led to more effective scrutiny of permanence planning than was seen previously. A new service to support children on the edge of care is bringing about positive change to children's lives. Social workers feel positive about the new model of practice, Blackpool Families Rock. The quality of early permanence planning is inconsistent, however, which means that for some

children permanence is not secured in a timely way. This is affected by workforce challenges, including high levels of less-experienced social workers in frontline teams. Senior leaders are acutely aware of this variability in practice and the new director of children's services (DCS) is appropriately focused on improving workforce retention and consistency in practice.

Findings and evaluation of progress

The impact of COVID-19 (coronavirus) continues to be keenly felt in Blackpool, where infection rates have been high throughout the pandemic. Staff continue to work flexibly both in the office and at home, but this has meant that the workforce has had limited opportunities to meet as a larger group until recently. The new DCS is seeking to address this with face-to-face whole service meetings, in order to provide the right level of support to new social workers and managers and less-experienced staff.

The quality of practice and permanence planning varies greatly across the service, although management grip has improved, more recently in relation to some legacy cases where children have been experiencing neglect for too long. The progression of early permanence for younger children and babies is often timely, with clear planning evident from the pre-birth assessment stage, and permanence secured appropriately with alternative family members via special guardianship orders or through adoption. A new planning for permanence team is supporting early permanence for younger children through adoption, including providing additional support in preparation of child permanence reports.

Permanence for larger sibling groups and older children is not always secured in a timely way. The complex needs of these children, many of whom have experienced long-term neglect prior to coming into care, coupled with frequent changes of social worker, have had an impact on the quality of care planning they receive. This hinders case progression towards a permanence solution and affects the quality of relationship building with children and families, a key component of the Blackpool Families Rock approach.

The quality and timeliness of the pre-proceedings process is too variable, although some progress has been made since the last inspection. When children's circumstances do not improve, there is sometimes a delay in escalating cases to the pre-proceedings stage of the public law outline. This means that some children experience neglect for too long. For other children, the pre-proceedings process is used effectively to divert them away from court proceedings, and remain safely in their parents' care. Leaders are aware of this level of inconsistency, have refocused their approach to pre-proceedings and have recently increased service manager capacity to increase oversight of permanence for children.

Children who are on the edge of care are benefiting from the support provided by the family intervention team, which is making a positive impact for children in need

of help and protection. A strength-based approach is supporting these families to bring about sustainable changes in their lives, leading to a reduction of risk and enabling some children to remain at home rather than come into care.

Decision-making for children who need to come into care is more robust than at the time of the last inspection, and the risk of harm children experience is mostly responded to effectively. Appropriate action is taken to place children with extended family members or foster carers when concerns escalate. Children receive safe and appropriate support once in care, and this is leading to improved outcomes for some children who thrive and make progress in their placements.

When care proceedings are issued in response to emerging concerns, there is appropriate permanence panel oversight and management sign-off of key decisions. However, the quality of court applications and court work continues to be inconsistent.

Permanence panels and care planning panels are well established, regular and help progress permanence plans for children. These panels oversee care plans from an early stage throughout the court process, and provide a clear rationale for all permanence options. This has not always been sufficient to eliminate drift and delay for all children, particularly older children and large sibling groups. Senior leaders recognise the need to do more in this respect and are focused on skilling up frontline managers to quality assure this area of work more effectively.

Care planning meetings provide a clear rationale and timeline for permanence planning, although there is currently no standalone care plan document due to a systems issue. This can lead to delays updating the child's care plan following a statutory review, and there are plans to rectify this in the coming months. Contingency planning is sometimes unclear or over-optimistic and leaders recognise that this requires more scrutiny to ensure that permanence solutions are realistic and within the child's timeframes.

Statutory reviews are mostly timely, well attended by partners and consider permanence at the second review in the majority of cases. A clear strength in Blackpool is that minutes of reviews are written to the child with great sensitivity by the independent reviewing officer (IRO), which supports children to understand their journey in care. IROs sometimes challenge the care plan and escalate issues appropriately, but this is not always securing timely permanence for children.

Most children are visited appropriately within statutory timescales, although records do not always reflect the direct work that social workers say is being undertaken with children. Chronologies are often detailed and relevant to understanding permanence planning for children, but are not consistently completed on children's records. This is compounded by frequent changes of social worker at crucial points in the progression of the permanence plan.

Senior leaders continue to prioritise appropriately the key areas which need improvement and work effectively alongside a partner in practice (PIP), improvement board partners and an improvement advisor. There is a recognition of the high numbers of children in care both historically and currently, the challenges relating to sufficiency and the impact this has on placement stability. Senior leaders understand the shortfalls in practice and are taking action to improve service responses to children. This is leading to some positive impact, but it is taking time to embed given the level of workforce churn, the complexity of work held by less-experienced staff and the model of practice not yet fully embedded. The new DCS has made workforce a key priority, has set up a new board to oversee this, and is beginning to develop a refreshed strategy, appropriately focused on retention and levels of experienced staff.

Auditing activity is regular, continues to be thematic in its approach and identifies the appropriate shortfalls in practice in relation to permanence planning for children. Audits have highlighted that the quality of planning is affected by changes of social worker, an over-reliance of families putting themselves forward as alternative carers, and that there is limited life story work being completed with children, all of which can lead to drift and delay. The impact of audit activity on work with children is not always visible, although there are sometimes constructive discussions with social workers and managers to address the learning from audits. Performance information is sufficiently detailed, improved since the last inspection and ensures that the local authority knows itself well.

Social workers report feeling well supported and in receipt of regular, good-quality supervision. The records do not always reflect this and there are sometimes gaps. When supervisions are evident on the child's record, they do show a detailed and reflective discussion about next steps and the impact of recent assessments on permanence decision-making. Training has continued at pace throughout the pandemic, including supervision for frontline managers delivered by one of the PIPs, and training on the new model of practice to all staff led by the principal social worker.

Caseloads are too high for some social workers, although there is a continual effort to recruit and fill vacant posts. Recent changes to the service structure are helping to rebalance workloads to some extent. Despite these challenges, social workers told inspectors that they are very positive about working in Blackpool. They report feeling valued and well supported by visible and accessible managers and are positive about the new Blackpool Families Rock model of practice.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Lorna Schlechte
Her Majesty's Inspector