

14 January 2022

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Dear Jim

Monitoring visit to St Helens children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to St Helens children's services on 23 and 24 November 2021. This was the third monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in September 2019. Her Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Mandy Nightingale and Neil Penswick.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the following areas of concern identified at the last inspection:

- Children in need
- Children subject to a child protection plan

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, with inspectors meeting social workers and managers in person within the current government guidelines.

Headline findings

The quality of most services for children in need and those in need of protection has not improved since the focused visit to the local authority in May 2021. The renewed quality assurance framework has not led to improving leaders' understanding of children's circumstances or developments in the quality of social work that had been anticipated by leaders.

Challenges in the stability of the workforce, ineffective management oversight and the recent introduction of a new recording process for the social work practice model have all contributed to this lack of progress. For too many children, there is a lack of timely progress and work completed to address their needs.

The wider council has continued to support the local authority's improvement, with funding to increase the resources available for edge of care services and a financial commitment to support the recruitment and retention of the social care workforce. The expansion of the edge of care service has been delayed owing to capacity pressures in other parts of the council and, while the number of vacancies has reduced, it is too soon to see any impact for children from the recruitment and retention of social workers and team managers.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Since the focused visit in May 2021, St Helens has continued to experience high levels of confirmed COVID-19 rates. Despite the additional pressures that this brings, the workforce is seeing children face to face whenever possible to monitor how well they are being safeguarded and receiving relevant services. Until very recently, staff continued to work from home. St Helens now has a hybrid model, with some teams meeting in person on a weekly basis and some social workers returning to office working to support their individual circumstances. Social workers' views of working from home were varied, with some describing benefits while for others it was not as positive.

Children in the assessment service experience too many changes of social workers. Most children are not able to build trusting relationships with their social workers and this has an impact on their ability to fully share their experiences. This also creates a 'stop/start' approach to practice within the multi-agency group, leading to some children experiencing delays in having their needs fully met.

Children's views are sought and well recorded. Most social workers have a good understanding of the child's chronological history, however, this has not led to an understanding of the child's daily life and how their past experiences have an impact on them. Some children benefit from the purposeful direct work completed by family intervention workers. There is also some thoughtful and effective practice by skilled social workers to reduce the risk of harm children experience in their lives.

When risks to children change, appropriate decisions are made to step up or step down to different levels of support, including early help, child in need or child protection, and pre-proceedings. However, it is not always clear that the child's circumstances have been thoroughly assessed to inform these threshold decisions or whether they are the right decisions at that time.

Children do not always have well-written plans, with clear timebound actions, that reflect their needs. Too many actions are generic and adult focused and lack a consideration of the child's specific needs. This makes it difficult for families and professionals to understand what needs to be done to effect change and reduce risk, for children to improve their lived experience.

The local authority is aware that the implementation of a new practice model will require a change in culture for its workforce, families and partner agencies. Inspectors saw some early signs of success using the practice model. For example, there was improved professional accountability to assess the current level of risk and some parents have gained a better understanding of the risk for their children and what needs to change. However, these new ways of working are not consistently applied in practice.

The lack of robust written plans for most children undermines the effectiveness of the child in need/child protection review process and this means that some children experience unnecessary delay in having their needs met. Child protection review meetings continue to be carried out virtually. In some instances, this has increased professional and family attendance. However, inspectors were informed, and observed, that the local authority's approach to using their new practice model virtually is causing some difficulties in engaging professionals and families.

The implementation of the new practice model, along with the required changes to children's written records, has had a significant impact on some social workers' ability to carry out required tasks and accurately reflect the work that they are doing with children and families.

Ofsted's visit in May 2021 raised an area for improvement relating to how social workers and managers prioritise tasks within their workloads and avoid unnecessary drift and delay for children. There has been no progress in this area and some children continue not having their needs fully met and they experience delay in progressing planning for their future.

Practice has improved for children whose needs are considered within the public law outline pre-proceedings process. Clear planning and timely interventions mean that decision-making is supported by effective and regular reviews of the child's pre-proceedings plan. Parents are better informed about what is required of them to reduce the risk for their children. Decisions are now made more quickly to determine if a child can step out of pre-proceedings or further intervention is required through legal proceedings. The impact of this change means that only the children who need pre-proceedings intervention receive it and children remain in pre-proceedings for less time.

Management oversight is not sufficiently robust to identify, challenge and promote good social work practice. Supervision for social workers is regular, however, it lacks challenge to address practice that is not meeting children's needs. The written record of supervision does not support a social worker's ability to review what has been discussed and what action is required. Some management oversight and decision-making lacks a clear rationale. This means that social workers, managers and children, if they decide to access their records later in life, will not be able to understand why significant decisions have been made.

Since the last visit, leaders have increased the number of quality assurance audits and the amount of moderation undertaken to better understand the impact of social work practice on improving children's lives. Despite a concerted focus, the consistency in the quality of audits has not improved. Audits remain too focused on compliance and processes rather than the quality of practice with children. Moderators have a clearer focus on practice issues and impact on children's outcomes, and helpfully provide suggestions to support social workers' development and to improve practice. From the sample of case audits reviewed by inspectors, most audit judgements were downgraded through moderation. This demonstrates that the original auditing judgements are too generous and do not give senior leaders an accurate picture of the effectiveness of social work practice.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Mandy Nightingale
Her Majesty's Inspector