

15 February 2022

Victoria Gent
Director of Blackpool Children's Services
1 Bickerstaffe Square
Blackpool
FY1 3AH

Dear Vicky

Monitoring visit to Blackpool children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Blackpool children's services on 11 and 12 January 2022. This was the fourth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in January 2019. Inspectors also completed a focused assurance visit to Blackpool in February 2021. Her Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Lorna Schlechte and Kathryn Grindrod.

Areas covered by the visit

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

- Step-up from, and step-down to, early help.
- Contacts, referrals and re-referrals.
- Strategy discussions and section 47 enquiries.
- Emergency action out of hours.
- Child in need assessments.
- 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 used telephone and video calls for discussions with local authority staff, improvement partners and agencies.

Headline findings

Blackpool continues to make steady progress. There is an effective and well-coordinated multi-agency response to vulnerable families, despite continued high levels of demand. Risk of harm is recognised and responded to in a timely way in the 'request for support' hub, where there is a strong and collaborative partnership presence and robust management oversight. Early help is more visible at the front

door than at the time of inspection in 2018, but there is still more to do to develop an effective integrated early help response from partner agencies to ensure that children receive the right help at the right time. Senior leaders remain appropriately focused on workforce retention, and caseloads have reduced more recently in some parts of the service. There is an appropriate focus on 'getting the basics right' and developing a supportive culture for the significant number of less-experienced staff, but the quality of practice is still too inconsistent.

Findings and evaluation of progress

The impact of COVID-19 continues to be a challenge in Blackpool, where infection rates have been high throughout the pandemic. There has been a strong face-to-face presence at the front door throughout the various lockdowns, which has ensured that partnerships have been maintained effectively.

Children in need of help and protection are identified promptly in the hub, their needs are recognised and they receive appropriate support. Contacts are clearly RAG-rated and visible in live time on a large electronic screen, which helps social workers prioritise their work and understand the nature of concerns and children's vulnerabilities. Although there are various routes into the hub, including an advice and support line for professionals, these are regularly monitored by three hub team managers to ensure that concerns are identified and responded to quickly. Training to partners is valued and ensures that discussions about the quality of referrals, the role of parental consent and the impact on children are regularly considered.

Screening of referrals is detailed, timely and overseen by managers at each stage. There is appropriate consideration of historical concerns and this is clearly recorded. Conversations with parents are detailed and consent is appropriately considered. Thresholds to progress to a referral and social work assessment are appropriately applied and the impact on children is explored. However, inspectors saw examples where hub decision-making on re-referrals was not always accepted by the receiving social work team, or had closed prematurely, leading to a repeat referral. Senior leaders have acknowledged that this is an area requiring greater scrutiny, including the need to fully understand the reasons for an increase in the re-referral rate and the impact on children.

Early help practitioners contribute to decision-making in the hub about when to step up and down for an early help assessment. This ensures more appropriate signposting for early help support and there are some positive examples of early help assessments being completed with families. However, the recently launched early help strategy is not sufficiently embedded across the partnership and more work is required to ensure that partner agencies take on the lead professional role and coordinate early help support. Senior leaders recognise this as a priority. As such, an early help pilot in schools has been developed recently and three early help link workers based in the locality hubs now offer support and guidance to partners to progress this area of practice.

Multi-agency partnerships in the hub are effective, collaborative and supportive. Police, health and independent domestic violence advocates (IDVAs) are co-located with social workers and contribute effectively to information-gathering processes. Police are well represented, triage information effectively and have reduced backlogs of police notifications since the last inspection. Other agencies are not co-located, such as housing, but have clear lines of communication to respond to the needs of vulnerable young people who present as homeless in the town.

The response to domestic abuse at the front door is enhanced by the presence of two experienced IDVAs, who make contact quickly with vulnerable victims. They liaise appropriately with community health-based IDVAs in the hospital and put in place timely and effective safety planning prior to social work involvement. This ensures an early and targeted response to victims and helps prepare families for subsequent social work involvement.

Exploitation of vulnerable children is clearly recognised and there is an effective coordinated response through a daily exploitation meeting at the front door. This multi-agency forum shares intelligence from a range of agencies, including police, the community safety partnership and licensing authority, about missing children and potential grooming activity. The information shared informs disruption activity in known exploitation hotspots across the town. The multi-agency Awaken team works with social workers on targeted pieces of work, completes child exploitation risk assessments and return home interviews for missing children. It has recently increased its outreach operations following a recent pilot to provide diversionary activities for children at risk in known hotspots. This means there is an intelligence-led response to working with children who are being exploited, although senior leaders recognise there is more to do to develop a preventative approach with a range of stakeholders across Blackpool.

There is timely and proportionate action taken when children need a social work response out of office hours from the emergency duty team. The interface with daytime services is well established and effective, although the rationale for decision-making is not always clearly recorded. This means that the record of out-of-hours support does not always reflect the extent of work the team has completed to protect children.

When children need a social work assessment of their needs in the assessment and support teams, assessments are completed in detail, and review points are agreed with the relevant manager. However, the quality of assessments is inconsistent, and they are not always completed in the child's timescales, which senior leaders have recognised is an area for greater scrutiny. There is sometimes a lack of clear analysis and consideration of ethnicity and cultural factors in the assessment, which means that the assessment does not always fully consider children's individual needs. Although management oversight is evident in the assessment document, this does not always challenge the quality of assessment.

The quality of plans lacks specificity about next steps and timescales and there is not always clear management oversight of interventions to measure progress. This means that plans are sometimes too basic and focus on the presenting issue, rather than the underlying concerns which affect children's lives.

When risk of harm to children is significant, there is a swift transfer of responsibility from the hub to one of the four assessment and support teams. Strategy discussions are mostly timely, well attended by a range of relevant partners, ensure good information-sharing and provide a clear rationale for next steps. Appropriate decisions are made at strategy meetings to protect children.

Decision-making is clear about when it is appropriate to escalate to both single and joint agency section 47 enquiries. Child protection enquiries consider history appropriately and collate appropriate information from partner agencies to inform next steps. Direct work with children and families is often completed as part of section 47 investigations, which ensures that there is consideration of the child's voice in the process. Outcomes are mostly appropriate and children progress to an initial protection conference when they need to do so.

Since the last monitoring visit in September 2021, auditing activity has continued at pace, with the introduction of audit fortnights and a mix of thematic and full case audits completed by managers. Audits are often very thorough and provide reflection and detail about strengths and areas for improvement. They continue to tell senior leaders what they need to know about the quality of practice.

Management oversight at the front door is clearly visible on the case record, is often detailed and includes historical context, which provides clear case direction on next steps. Supervision records are completed jointly with the social worker, who provides a detailed overview of history and presenting concerns, with the manager contributing to a reflective analysis to inform next steps. This is sometimes completed well and explores the impact of neglectful experiences on children, although this is not always the case.

There is regular scrutiny of performance indicators and data trends, such as surges of demand during the pandemic and an increase in repeat child protection plans. Performance is regularly reported to the getting to good improvement board and is disseminated to all tiers of management. However, there is not a clear understanding of the reasons underlying an increase in re-referrals, the effectiveness of social work interventions or the response to chronic neglect. Some re-referrals occur after statutory social work involvement has ceased and evidence over-optimism about parental capacity to sustain change at the point of step down to early help or universal services.

Senior leaders are appropriately sighted on workforce priorities, including the need to build more experience and stability across the service. Staff churn has slowed in

recent months as a result of their focus on this issue. Significant progress has been made to recruit a team of permanent managers, and there is close oversight of exit interviews by the director of children's services to inform future retention strategies. Additional funding has been sourced to focus on workforce development capacity and build up skills for less-experienced managers through the development of a leadership academy. However, there are still a significant number of newly qualified social workers and agency staff across the service managing very complex cases of domestic abuse, poor mental health and chronic neglect.

In response to these workforce challenges, support has been strengthened for social workers in their assessed and supported year of employment (ASYE), to ensure that less-experienced staff receive regular supervision and buddy support, and are in touch with their manager on a regular basis when working from home. There is also a focus on 'back to basic' principles, to deliver a more consistent quality of social work in relation to assessments, plans, supervision and direct work. There is recognition of the importance of supporting and nurturing a significant cohort of ASYEs as they develop in their role, with plans for an additional workforce development manager post to provide more focused support to this cohort of staff.

Caseloads have recently reduced and staff report that there is a supportive organisational culture. They remain positive about the model of practice, Blackpool Families Rock, which offers a restorative and solution-focused approach to the complex challenges of social work in the town.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Lorna Schlechte
Her Majesty's Inspector