

6 April 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 2 and 3 March 2022. This was the fourth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in November 2019. Her Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Mandy Nightingale and Rebecca Quested.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the following areas identified as needing improvement at the last inspection.

- Front door services including the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) and the duty teams.
- The impact of leaders and managers on social work practice with children and families.
- The local authority's own evaluation of the quality and impact of performance and practice.

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.

Headline findings

Multi-agency working, management oversight and social work practice in the MASH have strengthened since the ILACS in September 2019. This means that when concerns for children are raised in the MASH, they mostly receive a prompt and appropriate response that includes passing on for an assessment of children's needs when relevant.

Difficulties in recruiting suitably qualified and experienced social workers have had a significant impact on the service that children receive in the duty teams. For too

many children, there is unnecessary drift and delay in having their needs promptly assessed and, for a minority, this leaves them in situations of unknown risk.

Since the inspection in September 2019, there has been a slow pace of improvement for children requiring help and protection in the duty teams. Leaders have taken prompt action in response to the findings of the previous monitoring visit in November 2021 and reviewed the local authority's improvement plan. The local authority knows where the weaker areas of practice are and have implemented plans to prioritise these. It is too soon to see an impact of these changes on social work practice to improve children's lives.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Children receive a prompt service in St Helens when concerns for their well-being or safety are first raised. Effective early help screening means that children are directed to the most appropriate service to assess and meet their needs. If risk for children increases or new risks emerge, then there is a swift and effective transfer process in place to pass children's cases to statutory services for a child and family assessment.

Professionals in St Helens make referrals to the MASH that are sufficiently detailed to inform decision-making for children. Parental consent to share information is sought from professionals and, when there are safeguarding concerns, parental consent is appropriately overridden as a protection to children.

A strong representation from a wide variety of professionals in the MASH considers concerns for children promptly to determine the level of intervention required. Mature relationships between partner agencies are evident in the culture of trust and challenge, and these promote the effectiveness of the multi-agency working in the MASH.

If child protection concerns are identified, then children's cases are swiftly transferred to the duty teams for a multi-agency strategy meeting. Prompt strategy meetings are held when there are child protection concerns. These are well attended by the relevant professionals involved in the child and family's lives, and the right decisions are made based on the information available at the time. The outcomes of further child protection enquiries (S47) do not always consistently recognise the increasing, cumulative risks for children. This means that, for a small number of children, they experience drift and delay through repeated strategy meetings, child protection enquiries, child and family assessments and delayed interventions to reduce risk and improve their lives. For a minority of children, this leaves them in situations of unknown risk.

When it is clear that a child requires their needs to be assessed through a child and family assessment, they are swiftly allocated to a social worker in the duty teams. However, too many children and family assessments take too long to complete. Some children experience delay in receiving specific interventions to reduce risk as these are delayed pending the outcome of assessments. For most children, the

assessment focuses on the here and now and fails to consider historical information when analysing risk for the child. When there are several children in the family, the impact of the identified risk is not always considered for each child, so each child's unique needs are not always identified and met. When assessments are stronger, they are prompt, involve a range of professionals, consider the impact of historical incidents, and assess risk effectively to make recommendations for next steps.

Children's views are regularly sought and recorded. However, these are too often simply 'likes and dislikes' and do not inform the social worker of what life is like for the child in their current circumstances. This means that children's views are not always informing decision-making and planning for next steps. Children are seen during child and family assessments, although social workers report their time is limited to build effective relationships with children owing to the demands of their caseloads.

Daily child exploitation meetings held in the MASH involve a range of relevant professionals to appropriately identify the support needed by children who are at risk of, or experiencing, child exploitation and children who go missing. Professionals effectively record and analyse information and reach good decisions about next steps, for example to convene a strategy meeting, provide information or advice, or signpost to a suitable service. This is ensuring that most children receive the right service and, for some children, is effective in educating them about potential risks and reducing risk.

Management oversight of social work practice at the front door is variable. In the MASH, management oversight is regular and well recorded, and this means that social workers are given clear direction as to what needs to happen next. In the duty teams, management oversight is present on the child's electronic record for key decision-making points. However, social workers do not always receive regular supervision, and the written record of supervision is mostly an update of the child's circumstances and a list of tasks to be completed. Previous actions are not always reviewed and there is no evidence of challenge from the team manager when there is drift and delay for the child. In a small number of records, there is evidence of reflective discussions and planning on how to meet required tasks.

Workforce stability and significant recruitment problems throughout all areas of children's services are having a detrimental impact on the quality of service that children requiring help and support receive. Some social workers' caseloads far exceed that which is desired by the local authority. Social workers in the duty team are actively working on children's cases that are waiting to be transferred to the next part in the service. This is having a significant impact on social workers' ability to robustly assess children's needs in a timeframe that meets the child's needs. Since the last monitoring visit, the local authority has maintained a continued focus on improving the effectiveness of practice audits. This means that leaders are now more aware of the weaker areas of social work practice and how these impact negatively on the outcomes for children. They have clearly considered how to address these concerns in the updated self-assessment and the recently revised

improvement plan. However, these concerns were raised in the ILACS in September 2019. As a result, this visit demonstrates that there has been a lack of rigour and pace to improve social work practice in the duty teams and, ultimately, reduce risk for children more quickly to improve their lives.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Mandy Nightingale
Her Majesty's Inspector