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Dear Jill

Monitoring visit to Trafford children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Trafford children's services on 12 and 13 July 2022. This was the fourth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in June 2019. The local authority was also the subject of a focused visit in March 2021 during the restrictions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Her Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Lorna Schlechte and Amanda Maxwell.

Areas covered by the visit

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

- The application of thresholds for children in need, including step-up and step-down arrangements.
- The quality of social work assessments and plans for children in need (CIN).
- The way in which all staff and managers listen to the voices of children in need, to inform individual work and wider service development.
- Management oversight of social work practice.
- Senior leaders' understanding of the quality of social work practice, through accurate evaluation of performance information and implementation of an effective quality assurance framework.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

Headline findings

There is too much variability in practice for children in need in Trafford, compared to other cohorts of children. Senior leaders have recognised this from audits completed in the last few months. This increased awareness has led to a recently commissioned review of the quality and effectiveness of services for children in need, in line with the strategic plan.

Children in need (CIN) are regularly visited by social workers, and some assessments and plans are effective at identifying needs and achieving change in children's lives. A service redesign, launched in October 2021, has led to the establishment of a Families First service, which aims to support children in need more robustly. However, the quality of practice for children in need across the redesigned service is not consistent, including in the children with additional needs team (CWAN). Sometimes, plans for children are not updated regularly or in line with children's circumstances. Management oversight does not always have sufficient impact on the quality of planning to avoid drift.

A stable senior leadership team continues to maintain focus on appropriate improvement priorities. The service still has a high rate of agency social workers, although some have been working in Trafford for a considerable period of time.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Assessments for children continue to be of variable quality, as inspectors found during the previous monitoring visit. Some are very detailed and clearly analyse the impact of historical risks, strengths and protective factors on children's experiences. Children's views and cultural factors are mostly taken into account appropriately when understanding family circumstances in the context of domestic abuse or neglect. This informs a broader understanding of children's lived experience.

Despite this, some assessments lack a thorough exploration of the capacity of parents to meet children's needs. Impact chronologies are not consistently used or kept up to date. Assessments are not always completed in timescale, or updated, when children's circumstances change, which reduces their impact on future planning. Although senior leaders use performance data well to monitor assessment timeliness, there is still more work to do to strengthen this area of practice and build on recent improvement.

The quality of CIN plans is also variable. Plans identify children's needs accurately, and are routinely reviewed, but they are not always updated as children's circumstances change. Some plans are specific about who is doing what, by when, and this leads to some effective changes in children's lives. Conversely, other plans are too brief and it is not always clear how progress is measured. Contingency plans are not always specific enough about what needs to happen if progress is not sustained. It is not always clear from plans what strategies should be used by social

workers to address a lack of engagement by children and families. This limits the effectiveness of social work interventions with children in need of support. Senior leaders understand from quality assurance activity that this is an area for further development.

Thresholds for children in need are appropriately applied and social workers escalate cases when risk of harm increases. Managers use new tracking systems well to ensure that they have increased oversight of longer term child in need work. Despite this, inspectors saw some examples when social workers were planning to end their statutory involvement with children and families before there was a clear rationale for doing so. This indicates that the quality of management oversight is not sufficiently robust in all cases to ensure that children continue to receive support for as long as is needed.

When children step down from a child protection plan (CPP) to a CIN plan, there is a clear record of the rationale for this multi-agency decision. Professionals within the child protection review conference carefully consider what progress has been made in order to determine whether there has been a reduction in risk to children. These decisions are sometimes made when there is outstanding work to be completed, such as work with victims and perpetrators of domestic abuse, which should be addressed in the subsequent CIN plans. Although some CIN review meetings are held promptly, this is not always the case. This means that CIN planning following step-down decision-making is not always sufficiently focused, or timely, to ensure that children continue to receive the right level of support and plans do not drift.

Regular reviews of children in need are well attended by relevant professionals, either virtually or face to face. Children do not attend their reviews and their contributions to these decision-making meetings are not visible in case records. There is some variability and duplication in the recording and updating of CIN plans due to system issues. Senior leaders recognise this and are in the process of updating their electronic recording system to streamline processes.

Children and young people are seen regularly by social workers who know them well. Social workers spend time developing relationships with children and their families. This leads to some purposeful wishes and feelings work with children, which then informs future plans. These conversations are highlighted clearly on the child's record, although this work is not always supported by a range of tools that could engage children in a more meaningful way. Senior leaders understand that this is an area for development and are seeking to promote greater use of direct work tools to skill up social workers as part of delivering their chosen social work model.

There are some positive examples of coworking between relevant professionals and social workers to support the most-vulnerable children and their families. In many cases, schools are very proactive in supporting children in need. It is more of a challenge gaining consistent engagement from some healthcare professionals. Senior

leaders are sighted on this and are completing some additional work with partners to address the quality and level of engagement with children in need.

There continue to be workforce challenges in the CWAN team, where the quality of work is not strong. There is a recently updated action plan in place, which is focused on improving the stability and quality of work undertaken by this team. The action plan includes a development and training plan for each social worker, and actions to improve the consistency of auditing activity. An additional project team of agency staff is working alongside the CWAN team to address a backlog of work and to help develop the skill set of practitioners. Despite this, some children's experiences have not improved in a timely way, and they have experienced drift and delay in accessing the support and help that they need.

Supervision of social workers is mostly regular, although there have been some gaps in frequency across the service. Supervision records contain appropriate detail about the current situation and risks to children. Supervision sessions are not always sufficiently reflective to help social workers to explore what strategies might work, for example, to increase engagement with families who are not engaging with the support.

Management oversight at an operational level is not consistently recorded or effective. In the stronger examples, management oversight provides a clear and succinct rationale for future work. In the weaker examples, it is too brief and focused on compliance. There is limited evidence of managers challenging the quality of assessments or plans. Management oversight, more generally, sometimes lacks sufficient impact to ensure that social work interventions are purposeful and effective. Senior leaders have invested in a management development programme to support this cohort of staff, and recognise that more work is required to improve the quality of practice.

It is positive that there is still a significant amount of audit activity taking place in Trafford. Thematic audits are undertaken appropriately in response to relevant issues highlighted in performance data. For example, a recent audit of CIN plans identified the need to strengthen CIN planning in the 'support and protect teams'.

The quality of auditing work continues to be variable and there is inconsistent involvement of family members and practitioners in auditing activity. Although moderation of audits has increased, and grading is more aligned than it was at the previous monitoring visit, it does not always identify the relevant practice issues. Audit actions are sometimes too focused on compliance and are not followed up in a timely way, which limits the potential for wider learning to be disseminated quickly, and to drive practice improvement forward.

There is still a high proportion of agency staff working in Trafford, although there is evidence that agency social workers are staying for longer, and there is less turnover in the workforce than has been seen previously. Senior leaders recognise the

importance of creating a more stable workforce, and have invested in training to ensure that staff receive appropriate input to strengthen their practice with children and their families. Staff told inspectors that caseloads are more manageable, managers are visible and supportive, and they like working in Trafford.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Lorna Schlechte
Her Majesty's Inspector