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Hilary Brooks Director of Children's Services
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Dear Hilary

Monitoring visit to St Helens children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to St Helens children's services on 27 and 28 July 2022. This was the fourth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in September 2019. Her Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Mandy Nightingale and Jan Edwards.

Areas covered by the visit

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

- Planning for and achieving permanence for children.

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 with social workers, managers and leaders, and talking to children and their carers.

Headline findings

The pace of change in the local authority has been too slow since the previous inspection. The local authority's children's service has also experienced a significant change in its leadership. A permanent director of children's services (DCS) was appointed in mid-June and the assistant director (AD) has been appointed in the last three weeks, following a period of them both working as interim leaders for the local authority. Together, they have reviewed the quality of social work practice and outcomes for children. Some children have experienced delay in achieving legal permanence because of significant churn in the 'children we look after' service.

However, there are early signs of an increased pace in practice with children, and some children are now achieving permanence in a timelier way.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Since the inspection in 2019, there has been a clear focus on permanence planning, especially for children coming into care more recently. Permanence planning is now considered at the earliest opportunity. However, for some children, this focus came too late and they experienced drift and delay in decision-making, planning and achieving permanence.

The increase of social work vacancies and sickness during 2021 meant that some social workers had too many children on their caseloads to complete the work necessary to achieve permanence for all children. The plan for permanence for some children has not been achieved because of too many changes of social worker, a lack of pace and ineffective management oversight. Current tracking systems, to monitor permanence planning for children, do not give sufficient assurance to leaders that drift and delay are being addressed effectively. The local authority is aware of this and has plans to refresh these systems. However, at the time of this visit, these plans were not in place.

For most children, this delay in achieving permanence has had a limited impact on their day-to-day lives as they are already living with their intended permanent carers. For a small number of children, the inability to identify appropriate placements means that their need for legal permanence has not been met.

During 2022, the workforce has stabilised and there has been a reduction in social work caseloads. This means that some social workers have been able to complete highly effective pieces of direct work with children and their carers, which are leading to more timely completion of permanence for some children. Children seeking long-term permanence in St Helens are starting to experience more stability with their social workers. This helps them, as they do not have to keep sharing their story with new people.

When children come into care, they make good progress socially, emotionally and educationally. An appropriate range of permanence options are considered for children, for example return to family, revocation of a care order, special guardianship order, and long-term fostering or residential care. However, the practice for assessing children's needs to achieve their long-term permanence plan is inconsistent.

Decision-making for children to return home to parents is not always based on an up-to-date assessment of the child's needs and their parents' ability to meet those needs. For some children, however, good-quality assessments have supported them to successfully return home to their parents' care.

Social workers know the children that they work with well and can articulate their needs clearly. Children are visited in accordance with their needs and these visits are purposeful, with children knowing why their social worker is speaking with them.

The voice of the child is sought and recorded well. Children contribute to their review meetings, either in person or through their social worker, independent reviewing officer (IRO), or carers. This means their views are being heard by professionals and taken into consideration when planning for their future, when it is appropriate. One young person told inspectors that they felt listened to, and that this means they now see the people who are important to them.

Children's care plans are not always clear, as they lack timescales and actions are not specific enough. This means that children, their families, and the professionals who work with them are not provided with a clear understanding of what they are working towards or when this should be achieved. Contingency planning for children is not always evidenced at an early enough stage. As a result, if a child's plan is not achieved, it is not always clear what will happen next.

Social workers and IROs have made a significant shift in their approach to recording and now address all children's records to the child. This is a positive move for children and helps them to understand their records. However, the quality of the written records is not consistent. Too many records include language and content that is not child friendly, and they shift perspective between the first and the third person. This will be confusing to read and potentially distressing for children who choose to access their records when they are older.

In the last three months, the current DCS and AD have reviewed the local authority's self-assessment, including their plans for children achieving permanence. They now have a more accurate understanding of what needs to change to improve the services for children and, ultimately, their experiences.

Leaders have taken decisive and timely action to strengthen their oversight, and the support that they give social workers, to enable them to carry out their duties more effectively. Leaders have targeted resources to meet identified demand, and this has had an immediate impact in reducing social work caseloads in some areas. It has also improved the quality of some social work practice.

The local authority has recently agreed its revised quality assurance framework, although at the time of the visit this had not been implemented. In the absence of an agreed quality assurance framework and a programme of case file audits over the last four months, leaders have implemented a regime of dip sampling and thematic reviews of areas that they are concerned about. They have also ensured that team and senior managers meet regularly to review the performance data. However, without regular case file auditing of all areas, leaders cannot be fully assured of the

quality of practice across children's social care services and the impact on children's outcomes.

Team managers have a clear line of sight at key decision-making points for children's permanence planning. IROs regularly gain the views of children and, for some children, they scrutinise their care planning. However, this is not always present for children who have experienced drift and delay.

Targeted training and intensive support for social workers, through the improvement team, have been effective in improving some social work practice. Social workers report they value the inputs from this team and that the training is having a positive impact on the quality of their assessments of children's needs.

Staff are very positive about working in St Helens. They spoke of the recent welcome changes, including more visible senior leaders, engagement in improvement work and feeling that their voices are heard. Experienced and newly qualified social workers, in the 'children we look after' service, told inspectors that they feel supported and receive regular reflective supervision that supports them to think about the child's care plan more fully. One social worker said that there is no hierarchy, and they spoke proudly that 'there is now a sense that they are all in this together, working to get to the finish line'.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Mandy Nightingale
Her Majesty's Inspector