

30 January 2023

Hilary Brooks, Director of Children's Services
St Helens Metropolitan Borough Council
Atlas House
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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 13 and 14 December 2022. This was the fifth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in September 2019. His Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Mandy Nightingale and Louise Walker.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the following areas of concern identified in previous visits:

- Assessment and planning for children in need and children subject to child protection plans.
- Leaders' assurance of the quality of practice and outcomes for children in St Helens.
- Stability of the workforce and how this impacts on children's needs being met.

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

Headline findings

Since the monitoring visit in November 2021 that focused on children in need and children subject to a child protection plan, there has been some progress in most areas. This means that some children do not consistently receive a timely service that is commensurate with their identified needs.

Oversight of the quality assurance service has been reviewed and is now managed by the assistant director (AD) for children's social care. This has resulted in a significant focus on social work practice and the impact on children's outcomes over

the last few months. The changes are very new but there are some early signs of impact of the quality assurance work informing leader's planning for improvement.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Most children's needs are well considered in comprehensive child and family assessments. The assessments almost always include relevant history, parental trauma and cumulative harm and balance the risks and protective factors in order to inform next steps. Children's voices are gathered and for some children these are informing decision-making. However, for most children, social workers do not always capture what life is like for the child, their understanding of what is happening for them or what they want to change.

Since the monitoring visit in November 2021, the quality of planning and the written plans has improved for most children. When new risks emerge for children, action is taken swiftly to ensure that they are safeguarded. Conversely, when risks to children decrease, swift action is taken to ensure that the level of intervention is proportionate.

Children's written plans mostly reflect what needs to be done and by who. They address the areas of concern effectively and most are clearly written. This means that they are helpful for children and families to understand. In some weaker plans, the involvement and responsibilities of partner agencies is less clear or there are too many actions.

The impact of domestic abuse and parental substance misuse on parenting and children's development is particularly prevalent in St Helens. Children's plans reflect this need and involve the Change Grow Live (CGL) service. This service provides a wide range of effective support for parents, helping them to develop an understanding of the impact of their behaviours on their children's development. CGL also work alongside parents and children to strengthen their relationships and inform future care planning. Inspectors saw evidence of families working with CGL and successfully overcoming their difficulties in order to continue to parent their children.

Multi-agency meetings to review children's plans are well-attended by professionals and parents. They are held regularly, and partner agencies and families are actively encouraged to contribute to reviewing the plans. For some children, they are supported to attend multi-agency meetings about them. However, when the plans for children do not progress, there is little evidence of challenge from partner agencies to address drift and delay.

Some children benefit from purposeful direct work with their social workers. This helps social workers to develop a professional relationship with children and provides an enhanced opportunity to understand the child's lived experience.

Most social workers quickly get to know children's information when they are allocated to them. Most arrange to meet children promptly in order to start building that relationship with them, and this means that they are able to understand the child's needs. Social workers articulate their knowledge about children and their work with them well. However, this is not always recorded on the child's electronic record.

The local authority has an accurate understanding of what needs to change to improve children's lives in St Helens. Since the appointment of the director of children's services and AD, prior to the last monitoring visit, there has been a significant focus on quality assurance in order to understand the impact of social work practice for children's outcomes.

Leaders are fully aware of the detrimental impact of social work churn on the outcomes for children, which are intended to improve their lived experiences. Recruitment of experienced social workers remains an area of concern for St Helens. At this visit, inspectors saw that the turnover of social workers has recently reduced. However, there are still too many children who experience drift and delay in having their plans reviewed effectively and their needs met because of frequent changes of social workers and the 'start again' process for children. The local authority, supported by the whole council, has taken proactive steps to increase recruitment and hopes to have a permanent workforce in place early in 2023.

Since the previous monitoring visit, audit activity has increased, and the quality of the audits has improved. Auditing is now completed collaboratively with social workers and the majority are moderated by a small group of senior leaders. Monthly audit reports demonstrate the increased number of audits, reflecting the improved practice. Leaders have implemented a robust learning loop that is understood by staff, so that learning from audits improves social work practice. This is giving leaders a better informed understanding of the impact of practice.

The recently implemented improvement team has had a positive impact on the quality of social work practice due to the wide range of training and coaching it provides. Social workers, team managers and leaders spoke positively of the intervention from the improvement team, and inspectors saw the positive evidence of their involvement on children's records. For example, when consultations with social workers have taken place, planning for children and family assessments has improved.

Most team managers manage performance effectively. They have access to a comprehensive data dashboard that they use on a daily basis. They now receive daily emails providing helpful data pertaining to visits and assessments that are imminently due. As a result, more children are visited regularly and assessments are completed promptly.

Management oversight is clearly recorded on children's case records. This includes general decision-making and ensuring that actions to progress children's plans are completed. For most children, this means that the managers are robustly overseeing

social work practice. However, for some children this is not the case and managers do not always identify when children's plans do not progress. For these children, managers do not offer challenge to the social workers' planning and interventions.

Social workers report that supervision with their manager provides them with the opportunity to reflect on their practice and consider barriers to progressing children's plans. However, this is not always reflected in the written supervision records.

Social workers spoke positively of the visibility and accessibility of the new leadership team, their involvement in the improvement journey, feeling valued by senior leaders and how they enjoy working for St Helens.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Mandy Nightingale
His Majesty's Inspector