

22 June 2023

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Dear Ms Jenkins

Focused visit to Calderdale children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Calderdale children's services on 17 and 18 May 2023. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Matt Reed and Nicholas McMullen. His Majesty's Inspector (designate) Ceri Evans shadowed this visit.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need and child protection planning.

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

Headline findings

Since the last inspection in 2018, senior leaders have ensured that areas identified for improvement have been addressed. They understand where progress has been made and where further development is required in child in need (CIN) and child protection planning. Senior leaders are aware that there are children who have been subject to repeat interventions. They have taken the necessary steps to understand the reasons and mitigate any risk, and are working with practitioners to improve practice and management oversight. An environment has been created where workers feel safe to practise. Inspectors report that this is enabling practitioners to work effectively with children who require CIN or child protection planning. More recent social work assessments identify need or risk, leading to multi-agency plans that are helping social workers ensure that children's circumstances improve in a timely way.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice?

- Evidence of sustainable change when decisions are made to end involvement with families or step-down from child protection to child in need.

Main findings

Most children who are subject to CIN or child protection planning whose cases were seen on this visit are receiving an effective service. This is ensuring that children's identified needs are met, and children are better protected.

Families are receiving services at the right level of intervention. When needs or risks increase, children and families receive the most appropriate service. There are some children subject to child protection and CIN planning who have had repeat interventions. This is a result of historical and overly optimistic decision-making to close or de-escalate the child's case to CIN before sustainable change is evident. This has led to some children being at risk of suffering further harm and having repeat involvement of social workers in their lives.

Recent social work assessments are detailed and evaluate risk and need effectively. The child's voice is consistently gathered, which influences planning. Assessments are routinely updated to reflect children's changing circumstances, which ensures that ongoing plans are focused on current risk or need.

Multi-agency meetings are regular and well attended by the professionals involved with the family. Good information-sharing enables progress to be considered and plans are updated to identify further actions to meet need or reduce risk. When safeguarding concerns are identified, strategy meetings are attended by the relevant agencies. Appropriate information is shared, resulting in effective and timely responses to safeguarding concerns.

Children are seen regularly by workers who know them well. Time is spent ascertaining children's views and the voice of the child is evident in records. There is a clear sense of the child's experiences that informs planning.

Disabled children are having their needs met by effective work within the disability service. Workers in this team have a clear understanding of children's additional needs, which is enabling progress to be made for most children. The work is child-focused and an appropriate balance is achieved of work being child-centred and supporting parents.

The family intervention team provides bespoke, practical and intensive support to families subject to CIN and child protection planning, which prevents needs increasing. Thorough assessments and well-focused plans ensure that support is mostly provided at the right level. Workloads in the team are maintained at a low level, which enables more intensive work to be completed. The multiple needs of many families have been met by skilled practitioners, which has prevented the need for ongoing social work interventions.

Managers across the service maintain effective oversight of children's cases. Supervision is regular and reflective, which enables most workers to be clear on the purpose of their work. Managers provide clear, timebound direction, which ensures that for most children's cases seen on this visit plans progress.

Management oversight of children in the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline (PLO) is robust. The thresholds for entering PLO are understood and members of a well-attended legal gateway panel ensure that decisions are appropriate. Effective tracking of children in PLO ensures that plans progress in a timescale that is right for the child. Appropriate action is being taken, with some children entering care and others successfully being supported to remain with their family.

Letters to parents as part of PLO clearly explain the concerns, support to parents and what is needed to prevent an application to the courts. Although some letters are long, the addition of the child's perspective, or, for older children, their direct views, adds impact and insight into the child's experiences.

Senior leaders have a realistic understanding of the quality of service to families subject to CIN and child protection planning and where current pressures remain. A detailed suite of performance documents enables senior and corporate leaders to maintain oversight of service demand, the timeliness of work and ongoing pressures. Challenges to recruitment and retention are being addressed through further investment in the workforce, and a commitment by senior leaders to creating the right conditions for workers to be able to practise safely. This is starting to have some impact, with recent successful recruitment and workers expressing a commitment to remaining with the local authority.

A clear quality assurance framework with a structured programme of auditing and dip sampling provides senior leaders with an insight into the quality of practice. Senior leaders are aware that the automatic grading of file audits by the case management system can lead to a focus on compliance, and overly positive audit outcomes. They have measures in place to ensure that there is an effective evaluation and oversight into the quality of work with families which informs service developments.

Workers consider their workloads to be manageable, and leaders are taking appropriate steps both to monitor and address higher workloads as they arise. Despite busy workloads for some workers, there was no detriment noted to the support for families seen on this visit. Workers spoken to report effective support by their managers and teams, which enables them to feel safe in their practice.

All social workers who met with inspectors are very positive about working for Calderdale. They feel well supported by managers who are available and who provide consistent and helpful formal and informal supervision. There is a clear workforce development offer and workers described having access to helpful training and development opportunities, which enables them to develop their skills further.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning the next inspection or visit.

Yours sincerely

Matt Reed
His Majesty's Inspector