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Risthardh Hare  
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Dear Risthardh

### **Monitoring visit to Sefton children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Sefton children's services on 19 and 20 July 2023. This was the third monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in February 2022. The visit was carried out by His Majesty's Inspectors, Lisa Summers and Alison Smale.

### **Areas covered by the visit**

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

- The effectiveness of corporate parenting across the council for children in care.
- The quality of assessments, plans and planning.
- Social work visits to children including the quality of direct work and life-story work.
- Quality and timeliness of health support for children in care.
- Provision of suitable placements for children in care and permanence.
- Impact of managers including IROs.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. A range of evidence was considered during the visit including electronic records, performance management information, case file audits and other information provided by senior managers. In addition, inspectors spoke to a range of staff including social workers and managers.

## **Headline findings**

Since the last inspection, the pace of improvement for children who need permanence is too slow. While there is improving management oversight of some children, changes are not having a systematic impact on improving children's experiences. Too many children continue to experience drift and delay in achieving permanence and having their needs met as weaknesses in care planning remain. Children who need protective action while in care do not always receive a safe and timely response. While performance reporting is now established, the breadth of data is too narrow and there is insufficient auditing and analysis to keep a robust line of sight on children.

The service is making progress in some areas. The corporate parenting board has been refreshed with clear and appropriate priorities and workstreams and this is starting to improve the oversight of children in care. Management direction has significantly increased to support decision-making including for children living in unregistered and unregulated placements. There are some areas of improving performance such as children accessing more timely health assessments, dental appointments and more children are living in stable homes. Most children's assessments are now being regularly reviewed, and looked after review meetings are written thoughtfully to help children understand their current situations. The introduction of clear practice standards, accessible tools and templates is giving children's voices a greater focus, and this is helping to improve the quality of assessments.

## **Findings and evaluation of progress**

Since the last inspection, there have been a number of significant changes at a senior manager level with the very recent appointment of a new chief executive officer, director of children's services and two new assistant directors. Senior managers continue to work hard and are making some progress to stabilise and sustain the workforce and reduce the reliance on agency staff. The use of agency staff remains high, but is currently necessary. The local authority is increasing the numbers of its own social workers through its academy, with 27 newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) due to graduate over several months beginning with 15 graduating in November. The recruitment of the next cohort of social workers in their assessed and supported year in employment (ASYEs) is well progressed. Seven international social workers have now commenced, with a further 16 due to start by the end of August. A small number of agency social workers have converted to permanent posts and fast-tracking recruitment mechanisms are now in place.

The corporate parenting board has been strengthened since the last inspection. There is now a clear strategy with five priority areas that have been co-produced with children, and dedicated workstreams appropriately focused on improving children and young people's outcomes. While routine performance information and

supplementary reporting is helping the board to better scrutinise, challenge and hold senior managers to account, data is not broad enough to support the monitoring of permanence effectively, children missing from care, or timeliness of mental health and emotional support. There are now increased opportunities for children to shape and influence strategic priorities and decisions, underpinned by a new engagement framework and dedicated participation officer. Senior managers and leaders recognise there is more to do to strengthen the voice and influence of children.

A quality assurance framework has been updated and refreshed. While performance reporting is now established, and information is more tailored to different audiences, the breadth of data is still not sufficient to monitor critical elements of care planning. Permanence and timeliness of the provision of mental and emotional health support for children are not routinely monitored. Despite mechanisms to understand data through regular senior leadership performance meetings, which is helping senior managers better understand performance themes and trends, there is insufficient analysis to identify areas for further scrutiny. This is limiting senior managers' line of sight on critical areas for children in care.

Routine auditing is now embedded, but half of the audits reviewed by inspectors were too optimistic in their judgements, giving an overly positive view of practice. While moderation makes appropriate adjustments, only a third of audits are moderated. Stronger audits are insightful, demonstrate curiosity and are providing a more realistic understanding of children's experiences. Weaker audits do not sufficiently focus on practice deficits and what this means for children. Some actions are task focused rather than defining what needs to happen to improve children's lives. Feedback and reflection from parents, carers, children and social workers are not always sought or evident. This is a missed opportunity for learning and reflection and to understand the impact of social work practice on children's experiences. Audit actions are monitored for completion and considered in supervision, but some managers record these as concluded when this is not always accurate. Consequently, timely improvements to meet children's needs are not consistently achieved and drift and delay are not always tackled.

Some social workers have worked in Sefton for some time, bringing continuity to relationships with children in care. These social workers know their children well. Most children are seen regularly in line with minimum requirements, but frequency of visits is not always responsive to changes in children's needs or levels of vulnerability. The introduction of standardised templates to shape case recording is providing greater consistency and is capturing the voice of children. This is helping social workers to understand children's day-to-day experiences and relationships.

Direct work is limited, including life-story work, to help children safely explore their past and prepare for their future.

When children in care require a protective response, this is not always timely or robust. There are delays in some strategy meetings and subsequent enquiries, and it takes too long to see children and take the necessary protective action when risks to children increase.

Children's assessments are now mostly updated annually to gain a better understanding of their lives and experiences, but not as needs change. This is an improvement since the last inspection. The quality of assessments is improving, but remains variable. There is greater emphasis on obtaining children's views to understand their lives and explore their wishes. Better assessments are thorough and provide a clear sense of the child's needs. In weaker assessments, multi-agency information is largely absent, or history is not well enough used to understand its impact on children, or the views of parents and carers are not fully considered.

Children's physical health needs are well met, and social workers work closely with the looked after children's nurse, who contributes to planning and reviews. More children are now having regular health assessments and dental check-ups. Some children wait too long to have their mental and emotional health needs met. Social workers take the initiative in securing alternative arrangements through individually commissioned services. Fast-track arrangements to support children's mental and emotional well-being have been recently implemented; however, it is too soon to see the impact.

Too many children continue to experience drift and delay in securing permanence for a number of reasons. The fundamentals of care planning to drive permanence are largely poor. Care plans and reviews are not sufficiently focused on permanence options, or how this will be achieved. Children's views are too often missing to enable them to shape these significant and life-changing decisions. Planning for some children is linear and focuses on a single path rather than progressing dual plans at the earliest opportunity.

Most care plans are weak. They provide a narrative of the child's needs rather than a structured plan with clear outcomes, expectations and detail about how these will be achieved. Contingency planning is largely absent. While social workers work closely with other agencies such as schools and health partners, their presence in planning for children is not consistently evident. Although looked after reviews are now thoughtfully written to children, most meetings lack clear focus on children's individual needs and resultant actions are not sufficiently tailored to meet these. The approach and frequency of care planning meetings are inconsistent, multi-agency partner attendance can be sporadic, and meetings do not routinely review progress against previous actions or identify next steps to improve children's lives.

The introduction of multiple panels has helped improve plans and progress permanence for some children. Tracking is underdeveloped and is not helping senior managers prioritise children and secure their permanence at pace. There is still a

significant number of children with a plan of long-term fostering that have yet to be formally matched. For some children living with family and friends for significant periods of time, the consideration and progression of special guardianship orders is not soon enough. The local authority has identified some children who live with their parents while subject to lengthy care orders which could potentially be discharged, and has recently recruited additional social workers and legal capacity to progress discharges, but this resource is insufficient. This means that children continue to be subjected to unnecessary and intrusive statutory processes for too long.

Assessments of family and friends who care for children are now more timely. Carers' assessments to inform placement decisions are more comprehensive and explore if carers can safely meet children's longer-term needs. In a small number of instances, these assessments are not always informing the decision to agree the placement, and senior managers' rationale for overriding the assessment is unclear. As a result, the local authority cannot be assured that these children are living in homes that meet their needs.

Some children live in homes that are safe and secure, including with their brothers and sisters where this is appropriate. These children feel valued and loved. There is an inconsistent approach to helping children maintain contact with those who are important to them. While family time for some children is well considered and supported by support workers, for others there is an overemphasis on the wishes of parents to the detriment of the child. Family time is not consistently agreed at the earliest opportunity, and for some children this has resulted in a distancing and irregular contact with children's parents. Arrangements are sometimes left for foster carers to progress, and some children lose contact with brothers and sisters or wider family.

The local authority is using unregistered children's homes for too many children and cannot be assured of the quality of care they receive. Many of these children have very complex needs and the use of these placements increases their vulnerability. Senior managers have developed systems to increase oversight of these placements, which include a dedicated panel, assurance visits and weekly visits by social workers. This is helping some children to move to more appropriate placements. A tracker is now in place, but needs further development to include all relevant information to further strengthen the monitoring of children living in these arrangements.

Senior managers are having some, very recent, success in moving a small number of children out of unregistered homes, utilising placements with parents and foster care with additional intensive packages of support. There is more work to do to strengthen transition plans, as risk assessments and mitigation are not well enough defined to ensure that all parties understand expectations and contingencies. Statutory reviews for children in these placements do not sufficiently reflect the complexity of need and how these will be met. As a result, this can lead to missed opportunities for permanence.

Supervision is not always sufficiently regular, challenging or driving forward planning to ensure that children's needs are met and to minimise drift and delay. There is insufficient reflection to help social workers consider permanence or identify next steps.

Social workers in the cared for children's teams were positive about some of the changes that have been made since the last inspection. They reported that workloads are more manageable and they are helped to improve their practice through the introduction of practice standards, tools and templates, as well as being provided with a comprehensive training offer. They said they feel listened to, and they benefit from a greater level of guidance and help from managers and senior managers, who are accessible and supportive.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Lisa Summers  
**His Majesty's Inspector**