

16 May 2024

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Dear Jenny

### **Monitoring visit to Liverpool City Council children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Liverpool City Council children's services on 19 and 20 March 2024. This was the second monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in May 2023. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Kathryn Grindrod and Rebecca Dubbins.

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

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

- Child and family assessments and planning for children in need of help and protection.
- Identification and response to risk.
- Social work visits to children in need of help and protection.
- Caseloads and supervision.

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

### **Headline findings**

Since the newly appointed corporate director of children's services (DCS) took up the post in August 2023, she has continued to drive improvement with pace, determination and a strong sense of purpose. A new senior leadership team has been established and they are responding effectively to challenge from the improvement board. Additional investment has increased capacity in social work teams.

As a result, timely progress is being made to improve the quality of services for children in need and children who are the subject of child protection plans. Risk of

harm to children is recognised more promptly than it was a year ago. Children are seen more regularly by social workers. Assessments of children's needs are completed in a timelier way. The quality of assessments has shown signs of improvement since the first monitoring visit was undertaken in December 2023.

Senior leaders are acutely aware that there is more to do to improve the overall quality of social work practice, and they have laid the necessary foundations for this improvement work to continue. More effective systems, processes and resources are now in place to build on this early progress. Caseloads have reduced in recent months, which means that social workers now have more time and capacity to develop their social work practice, skills and relationships with families. Despite this, there is still inconsistency in the quality and impact of social work practice for children.

### **Findings and evaluation of progress**

Since the first monitoring visit in December 2023, the overall quality of assessments of children's needs has improved. Children in need of help and protection are allocated to social workers in the assessment teams without delay. Social workers consider the cumulative impact of historical risk factors for children more frequently. Relevant professionals contribute to assessments more routinely. Parents are usually involved in the assessment process, to ensure that their views are taken into account. Children are seen and spoken with during assessments, and their wishes and feelings sometimes inform assessment analysis and next steps. The timeliness of assessments has improved during the last six months, which means that children's needs are identified and responded to more promptly.

Despite this, some assessments are still not consistently strong enough to understand children's experiences. There is sometimes an over-reliance on what is reported by parents, without thorough triangulation and evaluation of all available evidence in relation to children's experiences. Children's individual identities are not always properly considered in assessments. Senior leaders were aware of the shortfalls in the quality of some assessments prior to this visit, and work is already under way to address this. This includes the review and launch of new policies and procedures, which establish clear expectations of practice, to improve performance monitoring and oversight of frontline practice.

Practitioners now have a more detailed understanding of domestic abuse and neglect than was the case a year ago. A range of services and support, such as the 'reducing parental conflict' programme, have assisted social workers to develop their knowledge and skills. This means that social workers usually recognise and respond to complex cases of domestic abuse and neglect more effectively than they did previously. However, there are still some delays in social workers taking decisive action for a small number of older children who have experienced long-term neglect and repeated periods of social work intervention. A new multi-agency neglect

strategy and associated action plan have been launched in recent months, in recognition of the weaknesses in multi-agency responses to neglect.

Immediate risks to children who are in need of help and protection are promptly identified and appropriately responded to by social workers. Strategy meetings are well attended by relevant professionals, and the actions agreed ensure that children receive the right help and support to protect them from harm. Child protection enquiries build on the information shared at strategy discussions to inform appropriate decision-making for future action. However, for a very small number of children who experience alleged physical abuse, child protection medical examinations are not always considered in line with child protection procedures. Senior leaders acknowledged that a more consistent approach is required in these circumstances, to ensure children receive appropriate support and treatment.

Thresholds for working with children at a child in need level are appropriately applied. Child in need plans identify key issues for children and specify where support can most effectively be offered. However, child in need plans are often too task-focused and they measure progress by the completion of tasks, rather than demonstrating a clear understanding of improved outcomes for children. This sometimes makes it difficult to assess how children's situations have improved, in order to determine when support could be appropriately stepped down to early help or universal services.

Child in need review meetings are not always timely, which can delay the coordination of effective support for families. Most partner agencies contribute well to child in need plans, although school nurses sometimes end their involvement prematurely. This means that subsequent planning for children in need is not always informed by up-to-date health information.

A wide range of services are accessed to support children in need of help and protection and their families, depending on their specific needs. This includes independent domestic violence adviser (IDVA) services for victims of domestic abuse, the 'Fiona Project' for parents experiencing serious mental health issues, and a team of family support workers who assist parents in developing their parenting capacity. The quality and availability of suitable housing in Liverpool limits the impact of support offered to improve some children's experiences.

When children are at risk of significant harm, child protection conferences are convened in a timely way. Child protection conferences are usually well attended by parents and partner agencies, and available information is carefully considered by professionals to inform next steps. Parental views are sought and heard at these meetings, and the wishes of children are established and explored prior to the conference taking place. Risks to children are clearly set out at conferences by child protection conference chairs.

Child protection plans clearly identify areas of concern and they contain appropriate actions to respond to the needs of vulnerable children. Plans are considered at regular, well-attended core group meetings. Child protection plans are sometimes too task-focused, with measures of success based on parental engagement with services. This can lead to a level of over-optimism about the impact of social work intervention on children's experiences. Nevertheless, there have been noticeable improvements in this area of practice since the inspection a year ago.

Children are seen more regularly by their social workers now. This is a result of reduced social worker caseloads and a strategic intent to ensure compliance in relation to the timeliness of core social work activity. Despite this, the quality of visits to children remains too variable. Some visits are purposeful, with effective direct work being undertaken with children. This ensures that children's wishes and feelings are clearly understood. Other visits, especially when children are subject to child in need plans, lack purpose, are too brief and are carried out simply to meet required compliance targets.

Managers have more regular oversight of the work carried out by social workers now and the rationale for decision-making is clearer. Social worker supervision is more regular than it was at the time of the previous monitoring visit in December 2023, although the quality of supervision is still quite basic. The majority of supervision sessions focus on compliance and the completion of social work tasks. Typically, supervision is not sufficiently reflective, and it does not always focus on children's experiences. This limits the impact of supervision on improving the quality of core social work practice with children.

Leaders continue to have an accurate and realistic picture of services for children and their families. Leaders carefully measure the progress of improvement plans and they have detailed knowledge about the areas which require further development. External scrutiny is welcomed in Liverpool, and leaders embrace constructive feedback to assist their understanding of practice, which appropriately informs their ongoing improvement plans.

The commitment shown by senior leaders to improve services for children is tangible. The lead member is a passionate advocate for children. The council leader and chief executive are fully engaged in improvement activity. They have secured appropriate financial investment to support this strategic intent.

The developments over the last six months have been driven by the DCS, who has built a cohesive and skilled senior leadership team to support the improvement agenda. The leadership team is suitably supported by a multi-agency improvement board, which appropriately holds senior leaders across the partnership to account. At a strategic level, partners are now more engaged, and there is an emerging consistency in multi-agency planning to support the improvement agenda across the partnership.

Senior leaders recognise that social work practice is not consistently strong enough. They understand that strong foundations must be in place to deliver sustainable improvements. This has required support from corporate services to ensure that practitioners are appropriately equipped to carry out their roles. This includes the provision of appropriate office accommodation and necessary equipment, such as mobile phones. Some of this support has taken time to mobilise, and there is still more to do. However, since the previous monitoring visit, this corporate support is also now gathering pace.

Additional capacity has been put in place across children's services, which has led to the establishment of a number of additional temporary social work teams. This has resulted in a significant reduction in social work caseloads across the service. Social workers in the assessment teams describe feeling calmer and having more space to think about their work. This is starting to translate into improvements in the quality of social work practice with children and families. Leaders are aware that social work practice and management oversight require further strengthening. Detailed and ambitious plans are under way to support this, including leadership and management development programmes for first-line managers.

Quality assurance and auditing activity continues to develop with rigour and pace. This includes regular oversight of the quality of work carried out by temporary social work teams. Managers who carry out audits are beginning to show more understanding of what good practice looks like, although the quality of practice is not always consistently evaluated. The moderation of audits, which is accurate and ambitious, remains a crucial aspect of auditing activity and ensures that shortfalls in practice are escalated appropriately. The actions from audits continue to focus on social work processes, as the drive to ensure compliance with key social work activities continues.

Performance and quality assurance information is sufficiently detailed and wide-ranging in terms of its scope. It informs the accurate understanding that leaders have about the quality of social work practice and children's experiences. However, it does not always have sufficient impact on improving the quality of social work practice in teams. Appropriate plans are under way to develop further the communication and dissemination of this rich source of information to managers. This is to ensure that performance and quality assurance information informs practice improvement across the service.

Arrangements to secure wider service feedback from children and families are developing in line with service improvement plans. A participation and engagement board was recently launched with support from young advisers, and an overarching participation strategy is due to be launched soon. It is too early to see the impact of this work on enabling children and families to influence improvement plans.

Workers are positive about working in Liverpool and they feel well supported by their teams and managers. They recognise that the recent introduction of 'keep safe

indicators' is a positive development, which provides greater clarity about their roles and how they work with families. Social workers report that they now have more time to develop as practitioners and to improve the quality of their work with children and families. They remain optimistic about recent developments and the direction of further improvement activity.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Kathryn Grindrod  
**His Majesty's Inspector**