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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 8 and 9 July 2024. This was the third 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:

- Planning and achieving permanence for children in care.
- The sufficiency of suitable placements that can meet children's assessed needs.
- The quality of social work visits and direct work with children.
- The identification of, and response to, risks to children in care.
- The quality of case supervision.

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. Inspectors spoke to a range of staff, including social workers and managers, and also met with some children.

Headline findings

Since the most recent monitoring visit in March 2024, there has been continued progress in relation to the improvement of services to children in Liverpool. The permanent senior leadership team is driving improvement plans at a timely pace.

Improved senior manager oversight and tracking of permanence plans for children, along with additional capacity and reduced social work caseloads, mean that children who have previously experienced delays are now achieving permanence. The senior leadership team know the service very well and have an accurate understanding of strengths and areas for development. Social work practice with children in care is improving, although there is much more to do to improve the overall quality and impact of case supervision by first line managers.

Wider council support services, such as human resources (HR) and information technology (IT), have further developed their offer to children's social care since the monitoring visit in March 2024. This is supporting improvements in social work practice through more effective recruitment and retention of staff, and the provision of suitable IT equipment.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Social workers for children in care are committed to ensuring that their children achieve the best outcomes they can. Until recently, high caseloads prevented social workers from developing close relationships with children or prioritising less urgent social work tasks. This culminated in children experiencing unnecessary delays in achieving permanence, such as the delayed progression of special guardianship orders (SGOs), or the discharge of care orders, when it was appropriate. As a result, some children have remained in care longer than necessary, although senior leaders are well sighted on this issue and have taken appropriate steps to address some legacy concerns.

When children come into care in a planned way, their options for permanence are mostly well considered and under way. For those children who come into care in an emergency, prompt consideration is given to short- and longer-term plans for them. When children cannot remain at home with their parents, consideration is now routinely given to whether they can live within their wider family network.

Routine consideration is also given to whether children can and should live with their brothers and sisters when they come into care, and together or apart assessments are completed to inform decision-making during care proceedings. However, a lack of sufficiency of appropriate placements means that children cannot always live with their brothers and sisters. In addition, some children are not living in the most suitable placement to meet their needs. For example, some children live in residential care because of a lack of foster carers who can meet their specific complex needs. The local authority has a detailed understanding of children in care, including those who are not living in their long-term permanent placement or with their brothers and

sisters. Detailed assessments of current and future placement needs have been completed. Alongside a new dedicated and expanded commissioning service, plans to try and address placement sufficiency issues are developing at an appropriate and realistic pace. This includes the creation and implementation of a sufficiency strategy.

While children in care are now visited regularly by their social workers, the frequency of visiting does not always increase in accordance with the changing needs of children. The overall quality and impact of social work visits to children has improved since the inspection in March 2023, although some visits still lack purpose and a clear outcome.

More children now receive support to help them to understand their histories and why they are in care. However, not all children who would benefit from this work receive it in a timely way. Family time is carefully considered and planned for children in care, and children's wishes and feelings inform how, and when, they see those people who are important to them.

Risks to children in care are recognised appropriately and incorporated into plans for permanence. This includes risks posed by potential family carers, or extra-familial risks, such as those associated with gang activity. Plans for children's long-term futures appropriately change if risks are felt to be too great to manage safely.

Although children's views mostly inform their plans for permanence, the quality of written care plans is still too variable. Some care plans clearly set out the response to children's short- and long-term needs. However, other care plans do not fully set out children's long-term needs and how they will be met. Many care plans still lack detailed contingency planning beyond the need to seek an alternative placement should the current placement unexpectedly end. This means that there is a lack of an agreed response should issues arise in the child's placement, which can sometimes lead to drift and delay.

Children told inspectors that they know who their independent reviewing officer (IRO) is, and they see them in between their review meetings. These meetings usually consider the key areas of need for children, such as their health, education and family time. When children do not attend their review meetings, it is not always clear why this is the case.

At a child's second review meeting, permanence options are set out to clarify expectations for all those involved. Tasks and processes which are required to achieve permanence are agreed and appropriate timescales clearly recorded. However, IROs do not always challenge effectively when children's plans do not progress as required. In addition, if children's permanence plans change in between review meetings due to changing circumstances or risks, it is not always clear that IROs have ratified the new plan prior to it progressing. This lack of oversight by IROs risks causing delays for children in achieving permanence.

Children in care have their day-to-day needs well met by their carers. This includes children whose permanence plan is for them to live elsewhere. When children are accommodated under Section 20, their long-term plans are promptly considered and progressed. This includes issuing care proceedings should risks escalate or supporting older children into adulthood.

Due to historical drift and delay in progressing SGOs and the discharge of care orders, some children in care in Liverpool have remained the subject of care orders for longer than they needed to be. During the last six months, a variety of actions have been implemented to address this. The overall tracking of permanence planning for children has significantly improved since the inspection in March 2023. This includes the introduction of regular permanence monitoring panels and detailed permanence trackers.

Alongside the improved tracking of permanence, two dedicated agency social work teams work alongside allocated social workers to progress plans for children to exit care. The SGO 'no detriment policy' is also encouraging carers to consider pursuing an SGO if it is appropriate to do so. As a result of these developments, more children are now appropriately leaving care in accordance with their identified permanence plan.

Support after SGOs are granted is available for families who want or need it. Detailed assessments inform effective social work with these families, with prompt access to the adoption and special guardianship support fund when appropriate.

Plans for children in care to return to the care of their parents are now informed by thorough assessments of their needs. Appropriate levels of support are put in place to ensure safe and successful reunification when this is possible. This is an improvement since the inspection in March 2023. An accelerated process has been agreed with the courts and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) to ensure care orders can be discharged without delay. As a result, more children who no longer need to be in care are achieving timely permanence.

Children who are to be placed for adoption benefit from careful planning which is sensitive to their individual needs. Family finding and matching is thorough and well considered, with introduction plans to prospective adopters tailored to children's needs. While there can sometimes be delays in care proceedings, there are no unnecessary delays in the adoption process, as a result of the detailed tracking activity carried out by senior managers in panels.

The chief executive and lead member continue to be well sighted on the progress of improvement plans and the areas for further development in children's social care. Since the previous visit in March 2024, there has been progress in developing wider corporate support for the improvement agenda. This includes developing clearer HR processes in relation to the recruitment and retention of social workers, and the quality of IT equipment provided to workers. This has been well received by the workforce. While plans to progress office accommodation for staff have taken longer

to implement, due to the complexity of the issue, they are now under way and timebound.

The corporate parenting board has recently been re-established after a period of inactivity. As it is at an early stage of development, it is too soon to evidence the impact and relevance it has on the quality of practice for children. A new children in care strategy and sufficiency strategy is in progress but has not been finalised. It is appropriate that the local authority is basing these important developments on thorough research and that they are informed and co-produced by children. There are realistic plans in place to complete and embed this work.

The current senior leadership team quickly established a wide-ranging understanding of the quality and impact of practice for children who require permanence. As improvement plans progress, they continue to welcome external scrutiny and feedback to further inform their accurate self-assessment. Leaders were aware of the strengths and areas for improvement that were seen during this visit and already have plans in place to address weaker areas of practice. Cafcass and the judiciary are positive about the leadership team and the improvements made to date.

The quality of auditing and quality assurance activity continues to improve. Auditors increasingly consider the impact of practice on children and ensure that children's wishes are understood, although there is still some over-optimism that audit moderation has to address. Leaders recognise that there is more to do to ensure that learning from auditing is widely embedded throughout the workforce and that it positively influences practice across the service.

Although case supervision is more regular now, the quality of supervision is generally not strong, as most case supervision records are too brief and task-focused. Supervision tends to lack reflection of children's experiences and does not always drive permanence planning for children effectively. Despite this, social workers feel that supervision informs their practice, and management oversight between formal supervision sessions is now more regular. This means that key decision-making is clearer on children's records.

Some children have previously experienced several changes in social worker, due to instability in the workforce. The recruitment and retention work in place is starting to have an impact on stabilising the workforce, and children are now experiencing fewer changes in social worker.

Social work caseloads have reduced over the last few months. This has been warmly welcomed, and social workers reported that they have more time now to do better quality social work. Social workers understand the improvement plans for the service and recognise the importance and value of quality assurance and practice development activity. They feel well supported by their colleagues, managers and senior leaders, whom they describe as approachable and visible. They enjoy their work in Liverpool, and agency staff are now more often choosing to take on permanent roles.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Kathryn Grindrod
His Majesty's Inspector