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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 25 and 26 March 2025. This was the fifth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in May 2023. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Kathryn Grindrod and Lisa Summers.

Areas covered by the visit

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

- Response to children at risk from exploitation or going missing from home or care, including assessment and planning for those children.
- Response to disabled children, including assessment and planning for those children.
- Supervision of social workers.

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.

Headline findings

There has been a significant improvement in the response to disabled children since the ILACS inspection in March 2023. Social workers' caseloads in the service for disabled children have halved and there is increased management capacity in the team. Disabled children now benefit from thorough assessments and plans which support them and their families effectively. Risks to disabled children are promptly

recognised and responded to, and social workers devote time to sensitively communicating with children to understand their wishes and feelings.

The immediate response to children who go missing from home or care has also improved from a very low base. Workers are persistent in their efforts to talk to children when they return home, to explore why they went missing. This information is used to try and reduce the risk of children going missing again.

Although the multi-agency response to children who are known to be at risk of exploitation is usually timely at the 'front door', children are not always promptly identified and referred to children's social care by partner agencies. The strategic governance of systems, processes and resources is too fragmented, and this can impede effective multi-agency planning for children at risk. Leaders understand that there is a need to develop a more coordinated approach, at pace, to enable earlier intervention and support for vulnerable children at risk of exploitation.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Senior leaders acknowledge that the number of children at risk from exploitation who are referred to children's social care is quite low for a city the size of Liverpool. This is because the early indicators of exploitation are not promptly recognised by all partner agencies. As a result, some children experience increasing levels of risk before they start to receive the support they need.

Social workers across children's social care have a basic understanding of the risks posed to children from exploitation and criminality. Risks to children are usually identified when they are referred to the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) at the front door, or during ongoing social work involvement. Timely action is usually taken to protect these children, although a small number of strategy discussions are still delayed. Leaders across the partnership are continuing to take action to address this issue.

Children and family assessments have improved in quality since the inspection in March 2023. Partner agencies contribute well to assessments, and children's wishes and views are sensitively sought and considered by social workers, who take the time and effort to truly know and understand children's needs. Most assessments are regularly updated and consider history well to understand children's experiences in the context of current worries. The overall quality of child in need and child protection plans has also shown some improvement, with plans being regularly reviewed to measure progress for children.

Despite these improvements, the understanding and analysis of risks from exploitation in assessments and plans are variable, depending on the individual skills and experience of social workers. Most children benefit from the support they are offered, particularly from the specialist Protect team, and the risks to them reduce as a result. However, the complexity of exploitation is not always well understood across the partnership. There is sometimes a lack of proactive police intervention to

reduce risks to individual children. This can limit the effectiveness of multi-agency plans. Independent reviewing officers have oversight of plans for these children, although they do not always have an impact in strengthening plans when needed.

Social workers are not always aware of the range of resources and support services that are available across the city for children who are at risk from exploitation. This means that some children do not benefit from available support to divert them from risky people and situations. Likewise, social workers do not always have access to intelligence about locations or associates of concern, which impacts on the quality and effectiveness of plans to try and disrupt exploitation. Multi-agency child criminal and sexual exploitation meetings (MACCSE) and child exploitation review meetings (CERM) are regularly held. However, they do not always result in comprehensive plans that are reviewed at the necessary frequency to meet the changing nature of exploitation risks.

Work with children who go missing has improved from the low base noted at the time of the inspection in March 2023. Workers are persistent in encouraging children to talk in return home interviews about why they went missing. They use this information to inform next steps to further support the child and reduce risks, promptly sharing any concerns they may have with the police and children's social care.

Since the last inspection, there has been significant improvement in the quality of social work with disabled children. Assessments of disabled children are detailed and thorough, and social workers take time to understand their experiences. Research is used to inform hypotheses about what is happening for children, and relevant professionals contribute to the analysis of children's lives. Plans are detailed, clear and involve multi-agency partners to ensure children's holistic needs are met. Regular reviews consider the progress of plans effectively and, as a result, work is well targeted at improving children's lives and supporting families.

Disabled children are seen regularly in different settings, and the close links which exist between all the professionals involved ensure that there is a shared understanding of children's preferred communication methods. Social workers respond quickly if there are concerns about children, completing thorough and detailed child protection enquiries. Risks to children are carefully balanced alongside their specific needs and are managed in line with their best interests. There is thorough and detailed oversight of child protection enquiries by managers.

Leaders have an accurate and realistic understanding of the quality of social work practice for disabled children. Caseloads in the service for disabled children have greatly reduced due to increased investment. Along with additional management capacity, this has led to a considerable improvement in the quality of help and support provided to these children and their families. These children now benefit from thorough assessments and plans that are supporting them effectively and protecting them from harm.

Case supervision is starting to improve in quality. While most supervision is still task and process focused, some supervision is now more reflective and focuses on children's experiences. There are indicators that the range of management training, which continues to be offered, is starting to have a positive impact. Leaders know that there is more to do to improve the quality of supervision, and the work to develop managers' skills in this area of practice continues.

The local authority has recently updated its approach to quality assurance. This is providing leaders with an accurate understanding of the quality and impact of practice across children's social care. Regular and detailed reporting to the improvement board and scrutiny committee is providing the necessary challenge to drive improvement plans forward.

The local authority, along with partner agencies, recognises that there is still work to do to develop a cohesive and consistently effective response to children who are at risk of exploitation or who go missing. Recently refreshed multi-agency safeguarding arrangements have determined that the response to exploitation will now be a priority, and a newly established subgroup of the local safeguarding partnership is taking a lead on this work. The local authority has recently appointed a dedicated head of service to oversee and drive these developments. Senior leaders now understand what needs to happen and are outward thinking in learning from best practice elsewhere.

While there have been widespread improvements in the local authority's work with disabled children, work to improve the response to children at risk of exploitation is still at an early stage. Leaders recognised that there was a need to initially secure improvements in core social work practice, such as assessments, plans and reviews, and in the quality of interactions between social workers and children. Having secured some improvements in core practice, plans and resources are now in place to develop and improve the response to children at risk from exploitation and those who go missing from home or care.

Social workers told inspectors that there have been significant improvements since the inspection two years ago. Caseloads have reduced and social workers feel safer and better able to deliver quality social work. They welcome improved communication from leaders about plans, and value the regular employee forum and the two-way communication it facilitates. Social workers say they feel happy, motivated and well supported in their work in Liverpool, describing themselves as 'being part of a family'.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Kathryn Grindrod
His Majesty's Inspector