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Dear Linda

Monitoring visit of Lancashire county council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Lancashire county council's children's services on 1 and 2 September 2016 with Shirley Bailey HMI and Sue Myers HMI. This was the fourth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in November 2015, following an inspection in September 2015. It is the first letter to be published.

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Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in areas judged to be inadequate in the 2015 inspection: help and protection and care leavers. Inspectors focused on children subject to child in need and child protection plans and on the quality of service provided to care leavers.

The visit considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, performance data and findings from quality assurance work. In addition, we spoke to a range of staff, including managers, social workers, independent reviewing officers (IROs), senior managers and senior leaders.

The local authority is now showing some signs of making positive changes, as seen by inspectors on this visit, with evidence of change having accelerated since May 2016. Prior to this, it was too slow in improving its services for children and young people in need of help and protection and for care leavers. The local authority acknowledges that there is more work to do to ensure that services for all children are good. It has a comprehensive action plan in place that is being implemented across the service to achieve this.

Summary of findings

- The pace of positive change has accelerated since May 2016. Prior to this point, it was too slow.
- The performance data collected by the local authority is more accurate and all levels of management are using the data more frequently to monitor and enhance social work practice.
- The local authority has established a cycle of audit activity that aims to analyse whether children are receiving appropriate help when they need it. However, auditors do not yet consistently identify all areas for improvement, and action taken to address concerns raised is not always sufficient or timely.
- Additional investment in staffing, including social workers and independent reviewing officers (IROs), has resulted in a recent reduction in workloads. However, some newly qualified social workers are allocated work that is too complex for their level of experience and, as a result, some children do not receive a service that fully considers all potential risks and protective factors.
- Although the local authority has invested in good quality training for social workers across the service, this is not yet resulting in consistently effective work with children and families. Professional curiosity by workers, managers and IROs was absent in some cases seen, despite this being an element of the training.
- The managerial oversight of casework through supervision is regular, but remains variable in quality. In a minority of cases scrutinised by inspectors, challenge to deficits in practice was absent or ineffective.
- There has been improvement in the involvement of key partner agencies in strategy discussions, with improved information sharing leading to better initial decision making to protect children. Subsequent planning is too focused on actions for children's services and parents. As a result, the role that partner agencies will play in improving outcomes for children is not always evident in child protection and child in need plans.
- Chronologies are increasingly used to ensure that assessments and plans are informed by a full understanding of children's histories. In a small number of cases, consideration of history was delayed or given insufficient weight.
- Recent structural changes have strengthened arrangements for the oversight of practice for children in need. All family support workers who are case holders for children in need are now supervised by qualified social workers who also attend key meetings to review the progress of plans.
- Delays in the transfer of work across teams mean that some children and families still wait too long before effective child in need work is undertaken or

progress of plans reviewed. This can give a message to families that changes needed are not important and also increases the risk of problems escalating.

- IROs now routinely monitor the progress of child protection planning between conferences, and this ensures timely intervention for children. However, in order to ensure that they have more impact on quality assuring the progress of planning for children, they need to challenge and escalate concerns more.
- The quality of case recording, while variable, is improving overall in relation to the cases seen on this visit. Case summaries, when completed, are effective in giving a sense of each child's unique personality and experience as well as in encouraging workers to remain child focused.
- While inspectors saw some good examples of direct work with children, practice remains variable and children's views do not routinely inform plans.
- At the time of the inspection, the local authority had recognised that it needed to improve services for care leavers. It had recently engaged with a specialist provider, and care leavers were involved in this initiative, along with the corporate parenting board. However, it was still very early days and the initiative had not resulted in improvements on the ground. This involvement has continued and increased, including care leavers delivering training to staff on pathway plans. Pathway plans seen at this visit were all up to date and some were good, and had contributed to improved outcomes for young people.
- There is more confidence in the data relating to the numbers of care leavers that the local authority is in touch with. This is an improved position from the time of the inspection. The local authority knows that they are not in touch with 13% of their care leavers, but inspectors saw examples of the local authority being tenacious in its efforts to support vulnerable care leavers and being more successful in keeping in touch with more of them, including some of the most difficult to engage.
- The quality of accommodation for care leavers has improved since the inspection, and there is a small increase in the number of care leavers in education, employment or training than at the time of the inspection in 2015.

Evaluation of progress

The inspection in 2015 identified specific areas requiring improvement for children in need of help and protection and for care leavers. These included:

- ensuring that robust performance information is available to support effective management scrutiny and challenge to poor performance at all levels of the organisation

- ensuring that audit work is undertaken and used effectively to drive improvement in the quality of frontline social work practice
- ensuring that the required levels of support and supervision are in place for newly qualified staff
- ensuring that all child protection investigations are conducted by suitably skilled, knowledgeable and experienced social workers
- ensuring that strategy discussions are held when the threshold is reached, are clearly recorded, and that they always include the police and health professionals in planning and considering the outcome of child protection investigations
- ensuring that assessments and plans are informed by historical information and diversity factors and that they focus on the experience of the child and accurately assess risk
- ensuring that all children in need are provided with sufficient oversight from qualified social workers and managers to ensure robust care planning and on-going effective analysis of risk
- ensuring that managers' decisions recorded on case files explain what evidence they have considered and on what basis their decisions have been reached
- ensuring that the independent reviewing service undertakes consistent regular oversight of practice and care planning in children's cases
- ensure that care leavers receive the level of support and information that they require to successfully make a transition to independence.

This visit found that the pace of change has accelerated since May 2016, following the appointment of the current director of children's services in February 2016. This appointment has brought additional management capacity within the senior leadership team and this has supported the implementation of structural and strategic changes that are showing early indications of improving service delivery. Some progress was seen in a number of areas reviewed during the monitoring visit.

Actions taken to support improvement include: significant additional corporate investment in staffing, resulting in reduced caseloads for social workers and IROs; creation of advanced practitioner posts to improve practice standards; and a restructure of the social work service with additional senior management capacity. This service model, based on specialist teams within a geographical area, is enabling staff to begin to develop expertise in relation to the particular vulnerabilities that children and care leavers experience at different points in their involvement with children's social care. Staff spoken to by inspectors are positive about the changes

and feel that they have been kept well informed and involved. Improvements in the quality of service offered to care leavers can be directly linked to these changes.

At the time of the inspection in 2015, the accuracy of performance management data was very poor. As a result, frontline managers had developed alternative methods for monitoring performance, which exacerbated the issues and meant that senior leaders and elected members did not have a clear understanding of what was happening on the ground or of the impact it was having on children. The quality of performance management data has improved and is increasingly used by managers at all levels to improve practice. Senior managers have an accurate understanding of performance and their assessment of progress of improvement aligned well with inspectors' findings.

Increased scrutiny of social work practice through audit activity, managerial oversight, and quality assurance by IROs does not yet consistently identify areas for improvement nor ensure that timely action is taken. In most cases tracked during this visit, inspectors identified some gaps in practice that had not been identified nor addressed. Managers and IROs are overly dependent on self-reporting from social workers, which means that work does not benefit from the challenge that is provided by them looking at the case records and analysing practice. This is an important area for the local authority to address so that it can be confident that its internal audit and quality assurance processes provide a clear understanding of the quality of practice.

The quality of practice remains variable. While almost all involvement with children, families and care leavers contained some elements of good work, this was inconsistent, reducing the overall quality of the service provided to young people and families. For example, assessments analysed some aspects of children's experience well but did not pay enough attention to others, including the sufficient and timely consideration of history or involvement with fathers in a minority of cases.

Overall, despite significant investment in staff training, inspectors found that the local authority has not yet developed mechanisms to ensure that sufficient 'professional curiosity' is exercised at all levels in the organisation. While the local authority is confident that the imminent addition of advanced practitioners in social work teams will address this shortfall, it is yet to be tested.

There has been a strong and necessary focus on creating an environment that will enable good practice to flourish. Children's services have undergone significant structural change with a view to achieving this aim. Change has been managed well and staff morale is high, although it is too early to evaluate whether the new arrangements will support the practice improvements that the local authority anticipates. Necessarily, much of the quality assurance of practice to date has focused on ensuring compliance with basic standards. The local authority now needs to give equal focus to improving the quality of service that children and care leavers receive.

The local authority recognises that while positive progress has been made against its action plan, this has not yet resulted in sufficiently improved outcomes for children, and that the current pace of change, combined with rigorous engagement by partners, must be maintained for children to receive a consistently good safe service.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Shirley Bailey

Her Majesty's Inspector