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Dear Jill

Monitoring visit to Trafford Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Trafford children's services on 28 and 29 September 2021. This was the second monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in June 2019. As a result of the restrictions in place during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic, monitoring visits did not take place after 17 March 2020. The local authority was the subject of a focused visit in March 2021. Her Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Paula Thomson-Jones, Kathryn Grindrod and Kendra Bell.

Areas covered by the visit

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

- The quality of social work assessment and plans, to ensure that they are effective in meeting the needs of children who are the subject of child protection plans.
- The response to children who go missing, to ensure that return home interviews are completed and records of these contain information that will help reduce risk in future.
- Management oversight at all levels of social work practice with children, to ensure that work is effective and is helping them to achieve better outcomes.
- Senior leaders' understanding of the quality of social work practice, through accurate evaluation of performance information and implementation of an effective quality assurance framework.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. This visit was carried out fully on site, with inspectors meeting social workers and managers in person within the current government guidelines.

Headline findings

Although there are some early signs of improvement in the quality of assessments and child protection planning for children, this has been limited by challenges resulting from the instability of the workforce and weaknesses in management oversight of frontline practice. Despite this, the work reviewed during this visit showed that most children's situations were improving as a result of the intervention taking place.

Increased corporate and political commitment, and stronger governance of children's services have enabled effective implementation of strategic plans to support improvement. Since the appointment of the current Director of Children's Services (DCS) in February 2020, an effective performance management framework has been established that ensures leaders have an accurate understanding of the quality of social work practice. Significant development work has been progressed with the local partnership and a full restructure of children's services has recently been undertaken.

Findings and evaluation of progress

As reported following the focused visit in March 2021, Trafford has experienced significant disruption and additional challenges because of higher than average levels of COVID-19. For the last 18 months, staff have been responding to the personal and professional demands of the pandemic, with long periods of restrictions and remote working. This has presented an additional barrier to implementing the cultural and organisational change that was needed to facilitate improvement in services for children.

There has been a determined focus on increasing the time social workers spend visiting children and speaking to them, which has continued through the pandemic. Children are regularly seen face to face, and are spoken to alone when appropriate. For some children and families, having several changes of social worker has meant that building a meaningful, stable relationship has been very difficult, and this has caused delay in the progress of plans for some children. However, some social workers have worked hard to address the impact of these changes and have gone on to develop good working relationships with families, which are helping to bring about positive change.

Assessments of children's needs routinely include historical information and their wishes and feelings are sought. There remain weaknesses in the consideration of children's identity, particularly when children are from a Black or ethnic minority background. Risks, such as living in a home where there is domestic abuse, are clearly identified, and immediate action is taken to protect children when this is required. However, this information is not well used by social workers to evaluate

what the impact is for children beyond their immediate protection and what needs to change to improve their lives.

Written child protection plans are not a helpful tool for working with the family or with partners. They are too focused on generic tasks for adults to complete, without clear measurable outcomes for children being in place. Many children are getting support that is improving their situation but, too often, the detail and purpose of this work is not reflected in children's records. This means that parents and professionals are not clear what should be happening, or if their work is ensuring progress for children.

Professionals from a wide range of agencies provide appropriate support to many children and they attend and contribute to regular core groups and reviews. Core groups are not always effective at measuring the impact of their work, as they too often measure if parents are attending sessions or completing work rather than if this is making a difference to their children.

Child protection reviews are timely and well attended. The impact of the reviews is often limited, because they do not focus enough on evaluating children's experiences. Child protection chairs do not ensure that a robust child-focused evaluation of progress takes place. For some children, this leads to plans being ended too early, before their situations have really improved, and is then followed by further repeat periods of child protection planning, with little progress.

When children who are the subject of a child protection plan are reported missing from home, they are routinely offered a return home interview by an independent worker. The information gathered in this interview is often limited, and the reasons for children going missing are not well understood. The needs of children are discussed at daily risk management meetings, but children's records are not clear about what action is then taken, or how information is incorporated into their child protection plan. Although these services have been maintained during the pandemic, they have not improved since the last inspection.

The local authority has made progress to establish strong corporate governance, improved partnership working and effective systems to provide an accurate self-view. They have appropriate plans for improvement and clear ambitions and priorities, and have maintained this commitment throughout the pandemic.

At the centre of this organisational change has been a restructure of children's services. Leaders' commitment to ensure effective consultation with staff and stakeholders, despite the challenges of doing this during the pandemic, has resulted in this taking longer than anticipated, with the process planned to conclude on 4 October 2021. Since the focused visit in March this year, workforce instability has increased, with turnover at the point of this visit being 13.7%. This has created additional challenges in improving practice, and has led to many children having too many changes of social worker. Caseloads remain manageable and the local

authority has developed strong plans to attract and retain staff, but these now need to progress at pace to ensure further improvement for children.

Over the last 18 months, leaders have developed a strong, detailed understanding of the quality of social work practice and are able to present an accurate self-assessment. Inspectors' findings during this visit confirmed that there is a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses in the work undertaken with children in need of protection. This is as the result of extensive, regular and detailed performance reporting, which provides helpful narrative analysis, in addition to the data itself.

Leaders ensure that where concerns are identified from the data, quality assurance work then takes place to identify any deficits in practice, and what this means for children. In addition to specific focused audits, a quality assurance framework has now been embedded, and results in regular case audits, including routine moderation by senior managers. The local authority has correctly identified that the findings from its audit work are not having sufficient impact on improving the quality of practice or the experiences of children. Inspectors found that although most audits result in an accurate assessment of the work, the individual feedback to practitioners remains too focused on process and compliance, and does not help them to improve their practice.

Management oversight of work with children has increased compliance, but it is not providing enough challenge to drive improvements in the quality of work with children. It remains overly focused on processes rather than children's experiences. Most social workers receive regular supervision and find it supportive, but managers do not provide sufficient quality assurance of their work. For example, when there are gaps in assessments, or drift and delay for children, this is not consistently addressed, and as a result the quality of practice is not improving quickly enough.

Instability in the workforce and weak management oversight of frontline practice, including that undertaken by child protection chairs, are limiting the impact of strategic plans.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Paula Thomson-Jones
Her Majesty's Inspector