

9 May 2022

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Dear Jill

Monitoring visit to Trafford children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Trafford children's services on 10 and 11 March 2022. This was the third monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in June 2019. During the restrictions in place as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the local authority was also the subject of a focused visit in March 2021. Her Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Kathryn Grindrod and Lorna Schlechte.

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 assessments and plans, to ensure that they are effective in meeting the needs of children in care.
- The way in which all staff and managers listen to the voices of children in care, to inform individual work and wider service development.
- Management oversight at all levels of social work practice with children in care, to ensure that work is effective and is helping 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.

Headline findings

Services for children in care in Trafford have shown some improvements since the inspection in 2019. Children are regularly visited by social workers, and some assessments and plans for children in care are comprehensive and effective.

Targeted strategic work is reducing delays in planning for specific cohorts of children in care. There is now an effective performance management framework in place and senior leaders are held to account by a well-informed and committed corporate parenting board.

However, the quality of practice with children in care is not consistent, and manager and independent reviewing officers' (IRO) oversight does not always prevent delays in progressing plans for some children. The pace and impact of planned improvements have been slow since the inspection in 2019. These have, in part, been affected by persistently high rates of COVID-19 in the local authority area. Senior leaders are strengthening the base from which they plan to further develop consistently effective practice, as a result of completing a service redesign, rolling out a new practice model and implementing new tracking processes.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Many assessments for children in care are sufficiently detailed and provide a clear focus for future work with them. These assessments include social workers' consideration of children's histories and current circumstances, together with careful analysis that identifies potential risks and needs. However, there remain some assessments that are not as comprehensive, and some are not updated when children's circumstances change. This means that, for some children in care, planning and decision-making is not based on their current needs.

Children's wishes and feelings are usually carefully considered when their care plans are developed. This is particularly true when family-time arrangements are planned. Children's other needs, such as health, education and social or emotional issues, are often not as well detailed in care plans. This can lead to lack of clarity about responsibility for specific actions and makes it difficult to measure progress of plans. As a result, some children do not receive support when they need it, for example, life-story work is sometimes slow to start.

Care plans are not always updated when circumstances change for children. Routine care planning meetings are in the process of being introduced for all children. While they are starting to have an impact, there is still drift and delay in progressing care plans for some children. This is particularly true for children who are voluntarily accommodated under section 20 of the Children Act 1989, a small number of whom have seen delays in their permanence plans being secured.

Recent targeted work has seen an improvement in progressing permanence plans for some other children, such as those who are the subject of a care order and are placed with their parents. The discharge of their care orders, when appropriate, means they no longer experience unnecessary statutory intervention.

Children in care are seen regularly by social workers. Some visits to children are purposeful, when social workers analyse what is being seen and heard to properly

understand children's experiences. Some visits to children still lack purpose, and changes in social workers have an impact on the quality of relationships some children have with their social workers. The local authority has recently completed detailed quality assurance work about the quality of visits to children and has started a programme of development work across the service. The impact of this can be seen in the improved quality more recently of some visits to children.

IROs generally know the children they work with well. They make efforts to meet with children prior to their review meetings taking place, to identify their wishes and feelings. Some individual IROs contact children on important occasions, to demonstrate that children are thought of and cared about.

Only half of all children in care attend their review meetings in person. This means that children are not always able to contribute directly to these important meetings about them. The local authority appropriately recognises that children's engagement and participation in their review meetings remains an area for development.

IROs regularly contribute to children's records, through discussions with social workers and managers and at mid-point reviews. However, this is limited and they do not usually set out clear and rigorous scrutiny of children's plans. Instead, they often note agreement to plans without providing a rationale about the appropriateness of planning for the child. IROs do not always challenge other professionals effectively when there is drift in children's care plans progressing.

Most social workers for children in care receive regular supervision, which they describe as helpful and supportive. Supervision of social workers by their managers is generally child-focused and future actions are usually agreed. However, these actions frequently lack agreed timescales, and this contributes to a lack of rigour in monitoring the impact of planning on children's outcomes. This leads to the drift seen for some children, such as those in section 20 accommodation, going unchallenged for longer than necessary.

Supervision of team managers also happens regularly and senior leaders provide clear direction about individual children when needed. Records of supervision sessions do not always contain clear expectations and actions to improve practice with children across teams more generally. As a result, there is variability in the quality of practice across the service, resulting in some children not receiving the right support quickly enough.

Staff describe an unsettled period during the service restructure and the start of embedding a new model of practice. While workforce stability is showing early signs of improvement, there remains some turnover of social workers. This is still having a detrimental impact, on children being able to build rapport with their social worker and on the remaining staff in terms of workload pressures. Social workers say they have felt well supported during this time and feel ready to take the next steps in improving the quality of practice across the service.

There is a strong corporate and political commitment to improving services for children in Trafford. This has been maintained throughout the pandemic, although the pace and impact of strategic improvements has been slow to have an impact on overall practice, in part impacted by COVID-19 rates. The corporate parenting board invites feedback from children and receives detailed, well-understood performance reports. The board members appropriately challenge the service as a result, and the impact of this for children is starting to be seen.

Recently implemented tracking processes are starting to have an impact in preventing drift in planning for some, but not all, children. Performance management and quality assurance processes give leaders an accurate view of the quality of practice, along with areas for improvement. Auditing activity is now more focused on children's experiences and outcomes, leading to actions that better support improvements for children as well as compliance. There is more to do to ensure that actions are fully completed after auditing activity.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Kathryn Grindrod
Her Majesty's Inspector