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Dear Stakeholder

Ofsted inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers

Following a recent inspection by Ofsted, I am writing to inform you that the overall effectiveness of the above children's services in Lancashire has been judged as inadequate. As you would expect, this is of significant concern to us as a county council and addressing the weaknesses identified by inspectors has immediately become our highest priority.

This was the county council's first inspection under the single inspection framework, which came into place in 2014. It focused on the experiences and progress of children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers. It also included looking at the effectiveness of our services and arrangements to help these children, including adoption and fostering.

The inspection took place between 14 September and 8 October and involved 12 inspectors undertaking a range of activity. They spoke to staff at all levels, to children and young people, and to representatives of a number of partner organisations. Much of their work involved reviewing documents but they also observed a small amount of frontline practice and, overall, there was significantly more emphasis on frontline care than under the previous inspection regime.

The inspectors identified a number of weaknesses which the council, with the support of its partner organisations, must now address. We are determined to make these improvements both promptly and sustainably.

This work has already begun and we have identified and started to implement a number of actions in response to Ofsted's findings. I would like to highlight here the main issues we will be working to resolve:

- Developing a more robust performance system to enable managers and elected members to rigorously challenge service standards



- Reviewing our quality assurance framework to support improvement in the quality and consistency of practice
- Implementing a strategy to retain experienced social workers and to ensure the appropriate support and supervision for newly qualified staff
- Ensuring our statutory responsibilities are met in all cases
- Ensuring good quality assessments that focus on the needs of the child, including through the use of historical information
- Ensuring stronger social worker management oversight of the care of all children identified as 'children in need'
- Monitoring and reviewing the use of written agreements to ensure there is never an over reliance on self-reporting
- Identifying a permanent home for all looked after children as quickly as possible
- Ensuring looked after children always move into suitable permanent homes as quickly as possible
- Ensuring young people leaving the care of the council always receive the level of service they need to make a successful transition to independence

To help achieve these improvements, we have taken a number of actions since the end of the inspection last month, including the following:

- Despite the significant budget pressures facing the council, the Cabinet has agreed an additional investment of £5m in children's services. This will allow us to increase staffing levels at the frontline, enabling the caseloads carried by staff to be reduced and increasing the capacity of managers to oversee and support their work. It will also create additional professional development and training opportunities, improving the quality of practice and recording of case work.
- A plan has been developed to improve the way our electronic records system is used as an effective tool for both operational and managerial staff, so that it will always provide timely and accurate information that enables performance and quality to be carefully monitored.
- Initial work has been undertaken to address variations in the consistency of social work practice, clarifying practice standards and expectations.
- New weekly reporting arrangements have been introduced to reinforce monitoring of activity and compliance.
- Strategic responsibility for the team that looks after children awaiting adoption has been transferred to the adoption service, so that there is now one single strategic lead for adoption.
- We are developing our work with the national New Belongings project to improve our services for care leavers. This also involves close working with Trafford Borough Council, whose care leaver services have been judged as outstanding by Ofsted.
- We have reviewed our audit grading system to reflect the Ofsted grading judgements and refocused our approach to auditing and quality assurance. This work will be supported by the involvement of additional social workers in our audit processes and support the monitoring of our improvement plan.

In conjunction with Ofsted and the Department for Education, the development and delivery of an improvement plan will be closely monitored by a Post Inspection

Improvement Board with an independent chairperson. The effective implementation of the improvement plan will be critical to achieving a much improved outcome when Ofsted undertakes a further, shorter inspection of these services in due course.

I think it is important to also mention here that the inspectors' recent findings included positive feedback about a number of aspects of service delivery and practice. These included recognition that, at all levels, there is a commitment and will to succeed in delivering the best outcomes for children and young people. Despite the overall outcome, therefore, the considerable efforts of our staff, and indeed those working for partner agencies, must be recognised here.

Some of the specific aspects of these services that were praised are:

- The way children and young people are listened to and their views recorded.
- The strong focus on identifying and tackling child sexual exploitation.
- The referral system for ensuring cases of children who are potentially at risk of harm are reviewed and allocated promptly to social workers on duty.
- The council's effective working relationships with partners on strategic boards, and the way in which children's needs are consistently considered across these partnerships.
- The extensive training programme provided by the council last year around the Common Assessment Framework.
- The strong focus of schools on safeguarding children around the Prevent agenda, which gives schools the confidence to intervene where appropriate to reduce the risk of radicalisation.
- The work of the council and police to manage cases of forced marriage and honour based violence.
- The way in which services in children's centres contribute to providing early help to support parents of children in need.
- Social workers reported feeling supported by line managers and that they received regular supervision.
- We have a coherent strategy to monitor children who are missing school.
- Social workers visit looked after children regularly and see them alone where appropriate.
- There are positive relationships with the courts and Cafcass, and court proceedings are better informed and more aligned.
- The number of children adopted has risen significantly over the last three years and adopted children and their families receive good support from the county council.

During the same period in which this inspection took place, Lancashire's Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB) was also inspected by Ofsted and was judged to be good. The report describes the LSCB as influential in initiating a programme of improvements in key areas of safeguarding and child protection. As a member of the LSCB, we welcome this judgement and will continue to play an active part in strengthening outcomes for children and families.

I have written to you today because I wanted to let you know as soon as possible about Ofsted's findings and the actions the county council is taking to address them. This work will not be straightforward but I know you will agree that it is essential we get it right. Therefore we will continue to communicate with you throughout this period of improvement, to regularly update you on progress. If in the meantime you have any specific questions or concerns I would encourage you to contact me at any time.

You can view the full report here

<http://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/local-authorities/lancashire>.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several loops and a long horizontal stroke, positioned above a thin horizontal line.

Jo Turton
Chief Executive