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Dear Ms Williams

Focused visit to Lewisham local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Lewisham local authority children's services on 5 and 6 September 2018. The inspectors were Marcie Taylor, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Louise Hocking, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Inspectors considered the local authority's arrangements for children who need help and protection, in accordance with the Inspections of Local Authority Children's Services framework. Specifically, inspectors looked at the 'front door' arrangements for the service that considers contacts and referrals, including decision-making within the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). They also considered transfers to and from early help services, the effectiveness of child protection enquiries and the quality of assessments and plans for children in need of help and protection.

Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers and managers, and meetings with specialist workers and representatives from partner agencies in the MASH. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.

Overview

The local authority has recently completed a review of children's social care services, which was commissioned by the chief executive following his appointment in May 2018. An independent in-depth diagnostic review of the functioning and

effectiveness of MASH arrangements was undertaken and concluded that progress to improve multi-agency arrangements since the previous inspection in 2015 has been slow. Staff and managers do not have access to effective and reliable systems to record work. This results in limited reports on key areas of performance. Some staff are unable to access the information that they need to undertake their roles effectively. Arrangements for auditing the quality of practice are underdeveloped. This has a significant impact on the ability of staff to understand the experience of children and families in receipt of early help and child protection services, and to measure service effectiveness.

MASH and the early help service are well resourced with experienced practitioners, and there is potential for contributions from a wide range of partner agencies. However, only a very small number of children benefit from 'enhanced' multi-agency information-sharing to inform decisions. Issues of significant harm are recognised and responded to appropriately, and work progresses to section 47 enquiries without delay; most lead to assessments and plans that are appropriate and proportionate to risk.

There is good progress in working with children with complex needs, and specialist roles to identify the risks and work with children who go missing, or who are at risk of child sexual exploitation or trafficking are making a positive difference.

Senior managers recognise that there is more work to do to improve the systems and approach at the front door so that all children receive an effective social work response. Appropriate plans are in place to address this.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The business processes and systems to progress and record work into the MASH, and the integration of early help and assessment records.
- The range and accessibility of performance data.
- Clarification of thresholds and access to services.
- The effective use of information in the MASH.
- The quality and consistency of assessments.

Findings

- Contacts into the MASH are 'triaged' to inform a decision about thresholds, and to seek further information from the referrer if necessary. The decision as to whether the need is for targeted early help or statutory assessment is made by experienced advanced practitioners, working on a rota basis. Too many cases are

assessed as needing targeted early help at this stage, and a small number of cases seen by inspectors should have received a statutory assessment. Parental consent is sought routinely, but this is not captured and recorded in a consistent way. This is overridden when appropriate.

- The early help service is well resourced, with experienced practitioners, but the high volume of referrals limits the capacity of the skilled early help team to fully promote the most effective early help practice with the broad range of agencies available. Partners are not clear about the levels of need and how the criteria are applied. This results in multiple referrals to the front door.
- When risks escalate, cases are 'stepped up' to social care for an assessment, and in cases seen, these decisions were all appropriate. The local authority is unable to run reports on the number of cases from early help that have reached the threshold for statutory services, and this limits its understanding of the effectiveness of responses to children's needs.
- The MASH includes a wide range of agencies. However, only a very small number of children benefit from comprehensive multi-agency information-sharing informing decisions. Information is only gathered from other agencies once a decision has been made for the referral to be handled by early help services.
- The process and systems to progress work are convoluted. Staff undertaking statutory assessments are not able to access information electronically from the MASH or from early help services, as the systems are not compatible. Workers have created individual work-around systems to progress casework. The separate work-arounds are only effective as they have been created by skilled and experienced workers.
- Issues of significant harm are recognised and responded to appropriately, and cases progress to section 47 enquiries without delay. Strategy discussions are mainly conducted by telephone and vary in depth. However, decisions seen by inspectors were appropriate. Subsequent assessments demonstrate effective challenge and professional curiosity.
- Vulnerable adolescents are quickly identified and receive a consistent response to risk. Inspectors saw strong practice in specialised roles such as with children who go missing and those at risk of sexual exploitation and other forms of exploitation. Effective tracking systems are in place for these children. Good progress was seen in the quality of work with children with complex needs.
- Assessments vary in the quality and depth of analysis. Most assessments cover all relevant domains, but the practice is inconsistent. Children are seen alone as part of an assessment. However, the limitations of the electronic recording system mean that this information is not gathered as part of routine performance management reporting. Not all direct work undertaken is reflected well in case

records or assessments. Frontline practitioners demonstrate a good awareness and consideration of issues of diversity and this was integral to most assessments seen.

- Management oversight and supervision take place frequently, but managers do not consistently provide rigour and challenge or take a fresh look at a child's circumstances. Records of visits are in some cases very brief, and do not clarify the purpose or outcome of the visit.
- Social workers are committed to improving practice, they are loyal to Lewisham and enjoy working there. An increasing number of agency workers are taking up permanent positions. Additional social work and management capacity, such as the recently created additional assessment and referral team and the changes in the children with complex needs service, have resulted in manageable caseloads, and are leading to improvements in the timeliness and quality of direct work with children.
- Managers do not have a comprehensive range of performance data or rich management information to inform their understanding of the quality of practice, or to assist them in identifying trends or patterns for children in Lewisham. This is a critical weakness that is hampering the effectiveness of staff and managers and impeding the local authority's ability to safely oversee the service offered and gain a clear understanding of the outcomes for children.
- The process to quality assure the standard of practice through audits is under-developed and insufficiently challenging, with learning and actions not always followed through in thematic action plans or in individual case supervision. In audits seen on this visit, the identification of inadequate work did not result in timely, robust action to address deficits for individual children or identify learning for the future.
- Senior managers have revised the local authority's self-assessment to reflect the findings in the recent independent diagnostic review of progress to children in need of help and protection and children in care, including an analysis of the current arrangements in the MASH. The revised self-assessment reflects the quality and impact of practice seen on this visit. The resulting improvement action plan is realistic, and actions have been prioritised appropriately.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning your next inspection or visit.

Yours sincerely

Marcie Taylor
Her Majesty's Inspector

