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Professor Sarah O'Brien
Director of People's Services
St Helens Metropolitan Borough Council
Corporation Street
St Helens
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Dear Sarah,

Focused visit to St Helens local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to St Helens children's services on 13 and 14 November 2018. The inspectors were Shabana Abasi, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Stella Elliott, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for the 'front door', where contacts and referrals regarding concerns about children are received and actioned.

Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers and managers, and a number of partners within the front door service. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.

Overview

Since the last focused visit on the 11 and 12 July 2018, the local authority has taken swift action to review a large number of children's cases using its internal audit system. The local authority has also engaged with external partners, who have undertaken reviews of specific elements of children's social care. Through this work, the local authority's leaders have gained greater insight into the quality of social work practice with children and their families in St Helens. The local authority is in the process of finalising their improvement plan, which appropriately includes actions in relation to structure, personnel, systems and practice developments. Additionally, the local authority has recruited to an interim post of senior assistant director following the last focused visit in order to strengthen the social work expertise of the senior leadership team.

The local authority is incrementally implementing the recommendations from a review of the front door that was undertaken in August 2018. The front door is currently in a period of transition to a new structure. A significant change has been the additional management and social work capacity in this part of the service. This has resulted in stronger management oversight and improved timeliness and quality in the screening of contacts and referrals. This additional capacity was put in place very recently and is currently only confirmed for a limited period.

The majority of children whose cases were reviewed as part of this focused visit receive a timely and proportionate response when they need help and support. In most cases, children in need of urgent help and protection are appropriately identified and these children receive a swift multi-agency response. While assessments of children's needs are undertaken and plans for support and intervention are evident on children's case files, the quality of assessments and plans is not consistently good.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The quality and consistency of assessments and plans.
- The quality and use of chronologies in identifying the cumulative impact of harm suffered and in providing a clear picture of the child's experience.
- Meaningful analysis of children's feelings and views to strengthen the voice of the child in case work.
- Agree on the front door structure and recruit to the relevant posts.

Findings

- The front door provides an easily accessible single point of contact for all families and professionals seeking advice and support.
- The early help coordinators provide timely advice to partners and identify appropriate support for children and families. They provide effective oversight for children's cases being considered for step-up from early help to social care and to step-down work from social care.
- Professionals from a variety of agencies make appropriate referrals to the front door. The quality of information provided on the majority of contacts is sufficient to enable decisions to be made about next steps to provide a response to children. However, there is variability in the quality of information on the 'request for service' form completed by professionals. The local authority is working with partners to strengthen the quality and consistency of the information they provide.

- Managers provide detailed and effective oversight of decision-making for contacts and referrals, and all recommendations for next steps are reviewed by managers prior to authorisation. Social work screening is thorough and well recorded. It is informed by multi-agency information, consideration of historic concerns, analysis of current risks and views of parents. Threshold decisions made in the front door are applied appropriately for most children, including decisions to look after children in emergency situations.
- Consent for liaison with other agencies is sought appropriately from parents and this is well recorded. When consent is overridden, a clear rationale is provided. Referrers are routinely contacted by the local authority regarding the outcome of the referrals they have made. This ensures that families' rights are fully considered and that referrers know what is happening in response to their referral. They also know what to do if they disagree.
- When children are referred out of hours, the emergency duty team responds appropriately to contacts and communicates efficiently with the front door. The actions and decisions taken by this team are recorded well and records provide the detail of the further work that is required by social workers during office hours.
- Most children at risk of significant harm receive a prompt response. Their needs are prioritised, and cases are swiftly transferred to the duty assessment team to undertake child protection enquiries.
- The majority of children who are the subject of child protection investigations receive the right level of intervention. Timely and well-attended multi-agency strategy meetings, prompt child protection enquires, effective information-sharing and a focus on risk leads to appropriate decisions and actions to protect children.
- The co-location of the front door with the social work teams supports effective information-sharing and immediate case discussion. Cases transfer efficiently from the front door to the duty assessment team. Team managers ensure that there are detailed case-allocation directions on all cases to provide receiving social workers with clear guidance, including timescales for actions.
- The majority of assessments of children's needs are completed in timescales but are of variable quality. In most assessments, the evaluation of history and analysis of risk lack clarity. This, in turn, impacts on the quality of plans. Plans are not consistently outcome-focused, and recording of information detailing what needs to be done, by whom and by when is not clear or specific. There is a lack of detail about contingency planning. Senior managers are aware of these deficits and plan to address them through the roll-out of a strengths-based model of practice.
- Case summaries and chronologies are not routinely updated. In some cases, well-written case summaries provide a clear sense of the child's history and

circumstances. Chronologies are not actively used as an effective working tool to increase the understanding of children's experiences or to inform risk assessments and decision-making processes.

- Children are seen and seen alone. Social workers know children well and, in most cases, records of home visits and sessions with children are comprehensive. However, there is insufficient analysis of children's views in relation to their current circumstances and it is not always evident how children's views influence and inform plans.
- Case audits reviewed by inspectors during the focused visit demonstrate that auditors identify both strengths and weaker practice. However, it is unclear how learning from audits is shared with the social workers or used more widely to improve quality of practice. This limits the usefulness and impact of audit activity. Senior managers are aware of these issues and are due to implement a new quality assurance framework.
- Social workers reported a calm working atmosphere and improved management support. They are very positive about the investment made in providing them with laptops. They appreciate the ability to work in an agile way and feel that this helps them maintain a better life-work balance.
- In the past few months, the senior leadership team has developed a clear understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of frontline practice. They understand the challenges they face and are adopting a systematic approach to raising practice standards and improving outcomes for children.

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

Yours sincerely

Shabana Abasi
Her Majesty's Inspector