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Mrs Gail Hopper
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Dear Mrs Hopper

Focused visit to Rochdale Borough Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Rochdale children's services on 9 and 10 January 2019. The inspectors were Mandy Nightingale, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Paula Thomson-Jones, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Inspectors reviewed the local authority's arrangements for managing contacts and referrals in the Early Help and Safeguarding Hub (EHASH) and thresholds for children in need of help and protection, including the quality of social work practice in the First Response Teams (FRT).

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

Overview

When concerns arise for children in Rochdale, they receive a prompt and effective response, and children who are, or who are likely to be, at risk of harm are protected.

Since the last inspection in 2018, social work practice at the 'front door' has improved. Consideration of children's needs is at the centre of all work seen during this visit.

The training and support provided for social workers has meant a preferred model of practice has been successfully implemented.

Children's needs are appropriately and promptly identified through regular social work visits which meet their needs. This means that children can build effective and

trusting relationships with social workers. Children's views are effectively gathered by social workers, and these views are used to inform most of the assessments made as well as subsequent planning.

Partnership working is a strength in Rochdale, which supports good decision-making at the front door and when assessing the needs of children and families.

A strong, child-focused leadership team that has corporate and political support from the council has made progress in achieving cultural changes to practice, which is evidenced through improvement in outcomes for children.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- Social workers having manageable caseloads to enable them to continue to deliver good-quality practice and the time to record the work they undertake.
- Recognition and consideration of the impact that areas of equality and diversity have on a child's daily life.
- Strengthening of management oversight and supervision to improve the consistency of practice for all social workers.

Findings

Social workers take the time to get to know children and seek their wishes and feelings, either through direct work with them or from listening to what other professionals know about the children through their direct work.

A skilled and knowledgeable Emergency Duty Team (EDT) works effectively with those who provide day-time services to ensure that children's needs are responded to appropriately. This enables the EHASH to promptly receive and respond to concerns, providing an immediate follow-up service where necessary.

Children who become looked after in an emergency receive an effective response. The Police, the EDT and the EHASH provide a cohesive and prompt service to ensure that children are safeguarded.

Since the last inspection in 2018, the work of the EHASH has strengthened and now provides a timely and effective service for children and families. Strong partnership working at the front door and the consideration of historical and current information about children support good decision-making. This means that children are receiving a proportionate service based on their assessed needs.

When child protection concerns are identified, they are swiftly progressed to the FRTs for an immediate response. Contextual safeguarding information about issues like gangs, child sexual exploitation or radicalisation are also swiftly passed onto the FRTs, which, along with the Complex Safeguarding Team, sensitively use specialist knowledge to support the child and family and so reduce risks.

Management oversight in the EHASH is effective. Regular supervision and informal consultations provide strong support to social workers, which encourages them to reflect on their practice.

The impact of risk on the child's life is clearly and carefully considered by social workers and is reflected in their decision-making. The written records explaining the rationale for decision-making could be improved to reflect the depth of social work thinking.

Children are protected through effective strategy meetings and child protection enquiries. Partnership working achieves good decision-making, meaning that appropriate and timely actions are taken to safeguard children. In a small number of cases information-sharing was not as strong. Senior leaders confirmed that they were aware of this and had recently taken action to address this with relevant partners.

Children are seen when it is appropriate for them, and social workers use a range of age-appropriate tools to quickly engage them in focused direct work. This means that children's wishes and feelings inform critical decision-making, like child protection enquiries and child and family assessments.

Assessments of children's needs are timely. Supportive interventions are offered to children and their families during the period of assessment, reducing any delay for children receiving a service. The quality of these assessments is variable. Good assessments are effective in identifying strengths and risks. They consider historical information using chronologies and genograms. Good assessments demonstrate the link between children's wishes and feelings and the analysis and subsequent planning that is undertaken to improve the circumstances for the child. Weaker examples of assessments were superficial and were not informed by the depth of information needed to enable the social worker to develop a thorough analysis of the child's needs or recognise the impact for the child living in a difficult situation.

A weakness in the majority of assessments is the lack of consideration given to the child's unique identity, and what this means for the child. In some cases, equality and diversity factors were completely omitted from the case record. This means that important issues of culture and diversity relevant to that child are not taken into consideration when assessing the child's circumstances. In cases where consideration is given to issues of equality and diversity, this consideration lacks depth and does not demonstrate the impact on the child's lived experience.

Decisions to escalate concerns are made in accordance with children's needs. Inspectors saw decisive action taken on most cases to address increasing concerns throughout the period of the assessment, demonstrating an appropriate application of threshold at the right time for the child.

Caseloads are too high for social workers in the FRTs. While inspectors did not see any detrimental impact for children at this visit, there is the potential that high caseloads place additional pressures on social workers' capacity to consistently carry out and record good-quality social work. Leaders are aware of the impact of high caseloads on social workers being able to deliver good-quality services for children and have an agreed plan in place to reduce caseloads. For some social workers, this is beginning to have a positive impact on caseloads.

Clear and effective systems and processes are in place to ensure that allegations of abuse by professionals and volunteers working with children are reported and investigated. The 'Safe after school' campaign encourages parents and carers to 'ask the right question' of providers to make sure that their children will be happy and protected in after-school and extra-curricular activities. Good relationships within the community and proactive work with families mean that this issue is at the forefront of safeguarding children in Rochdale.

Leaders have a clear vision for children's outcomes in Rochdale. Strategic plans are regularly reviewed, with good partnership engagement. This means that there has been some progress made in achieving the vision, with early positive signs of impact on practice and outcomes for children.

A comprehensive and well-considered development programme for practitioners and managers is equipping staff with new skills to improve practice and management grip.

A significant improvement since the last inspection in 2018 is a revised quality assurance framework. Rigorous monitoring of compliance to the auditing schedule is assisting leaders in having a good understanding of areas of good practice and of where improvements are required. Social workers reported that their involvement with audits helps them to reflect on their practice. Additionally, clear performance reports and regular performance management clinics, chaired by a senior leader, support leaders and managers to understand the meaning of data and the quality of practice to improve the outcomes for children. Social workers receive regular supervision which they report is supportive and reflective and helps them plan their interventions with families. The improved quality assurance framework means that leaders have a better understanding of the quality of practice at the front door.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning your next inspection or visit. Ofsted will send a copy of this letter to the Department for Education and will publish the letter on our website on 1 February 2019.

Yours sincerely

Mandy Nightingale
Her Majesty's Inspector