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8 February 2019

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Dear Ms Wardell

Focused visit to Merton local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Merton local authority children's services on 16 and 17 January 2019. The inspectors were Marcie Taylor, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Tara Geere, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Inspectors considered the local authority's arrangements for children who need help and protection, in accordance with the Inspection 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, the quality of assessments and the plans to meet children's needs.

Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers and managers, and they met with 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

Work within the MASH remains a strong area of practice, as it was when the local authority was last inspected in 2017. It is well established, with effective multi-agency engagement, and partners' contributions lead to timely and proportionate responses to the risks identified at the time of referral. Assessments are comprehensive and analytical, and lead to clear plans that help to improve children's and families' circumstances. Social workers are supported and supervised effectively by experienced managers, so that work progresses in a timely way. Case records

contain a clear rationale for decisions. Children are offered help that is proportionate to risk, and a highly effective and coordinated offer of early help provision ensures that families are not in receipt of statutory services unnecessarily. Experienced early help workers recognise when risks escalate and work collaboratively with social workers to provide additional support to minimise the need for statutory intervention.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The quality and consistency of plans for children.
- The tracking and monitoring of the management of allegations against professionals.
- The focus of case audits on impact and outcomes for children.

Findings

- Thresholds of need are clearly understood by staff and partners and they are applied consistently. Referrals to the MASH include comprehensive and child-focused information, enabling timely and proportionate responses to risk. Referrals seen from schools demonstrated improved collaboration and stronger partnerships in safeguarding and supporting children. Information seen in referrals from the police was detailed and was focused appropriately on the children's circumstances.
- Daily MASH meetings assist in the consistent application of thresholds, and partners demonstrate appropriate professional curiosity in their challenge of each other's perspectives. Routine use of the local authority's social work model leads to confident multi-agency consideration of risks and specific actions for individual partners to implement.
- When the threshold for statutory services is not met, children and families have the benefit of a highly effective offer of early help. The early help offer has been enhanced by improved coordination and clarification of the range and accessibility of services and provision. 'Common and shared assessments' are of an exceptionally high quality, informed by the effective use of a 'home inventory' tool that helps staff to identify the child's lived experience and the impact of parents' capacity to provide safe care. The tool is used to full effect to demonstrate improvements and any sustained changes, as well as increases to risk, and timely actions are taken accordingly. A comprehensive range of direct work tools and approaches, adapted according to individual child and family circumstances, have a demonstrable and positive impact.
- Most strategy discussions involve relevant partner agencies and demonstrate good use of family history and multi-agency information. Child protection enquiries are timely, with comprehensive and analytical assessments informing

decisions. Managers clearly record their rationale for decisions and identify the most appropriate next steps. However, in a small number of cases, not all actions are specific enough or have clear timescales for completion in order to ensure minimal delay.

- Assessments of children's needs are generally of a good quality, are timely, comprehensive, and are informed by history and research. Good consideration of diversity and an exploration of 'cultural norms' with families help them to understand why professionals have concerns. Social workers know their families well and make good use of the wider family network as support for children and their parents. Children are routinely seen on several occasions as part of the assessment, and their views are clearly listened to and acted on. Imaginative use of a wide range of direct work approaches and tools help children to talk about their daily lived experience.
- Good engagement and participation from wider professional networks lead to effective multi-agency plans. Children are visited regularly, in accordance with the plan, and regular reviews take place to report on progress and to update the plan. If circumstances change for children, partners are confident that children's cases will 'step up' to receive increased support, according to needs. Child protection plans identify clear safety goals but are not sufficiently specific enough in all cases about the steps needed by parents in order to make and sustain the necessary improvements. Contingency plans lack clarity for parents about the action that will be taken, should progress not be made.
- An increase since the last inspection in training regarding awareness-raising and the management of allegations against professionals has led to a growing number of appropriate and timely referrals to the designated officer. The Annual Report 2017–18 and quarterly update reports include a good summary of the work, but current arrangements do not include tracking the duration of investigations or the monitoring of timescales for the completion of actions.
- Management oversight is routine and frequent, and provides clear direction, support and challenge to workers. Supervision has a clear focus on the child, and the social work methodology underpins discussions which are reflective and task-centred. Managers provide a clear, analytical summary and a rationale for decisions. Staff feel well supported and have manageable caseloads that are kept under regular review. At times of increased demand, staff have confidence that managers will take appropriate and timely action to restore a balanced workload. Social workers, including agency staff and newly qualified workers, have good access to a range of training and development opportunities that contribute to their ongoing professional development.
- Senior managers have an accurate picture of the strengths and areas for improvement for services at the 'front door'. There is a range of activities in place to assess the quality of practice, including direct observations, practice and thematic reviews and case audits. Case audits cover all domains of a child's needs

and enable oversight of the consistency of practice across the service. However, some are overly focused on timescales and process and not focused enough on the experience of children, and some lack rigour and depth in their analysis of impact, limiting their opportunity to influence ongoing practice improvement.

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