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Dear John

Focused visit to Wandsworth local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Wandsworth local authority children's services on 16 and 17 May 2019. The inspectors were Brenda McInerney, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Anne Waterman, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Inspectors considered the local authority's arrangements for receiving referrals about children who may be in need or who may be at risk of significant harm (the 'front door'), children transferring to and from early help services, the effectiveness of child protection enquiries and the quality of assessments for children in need. Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including children's case records, and held case discussions with social workers and team managers. They also evaluated local authority performance management and quality assurance information.

Overview

There continues to be strong political and corporate support for children's services. This includes ongoing investment, including increased capacity at senior manager level, increased numbers of social workers in the referral and assessment service and plans for additional early help staff. Since the previous inspection in May 2018, there have been several changes in senior leaders, including a newly promoted director and a very recently appointed assistant director for children's services. The recruitment of a permanent social care workforce is a strategic priority. Since January, staff turnover has reduced and there is less reliance on temporary social workers. However, progress in the referral and assessment service has been hampered by staff turnover and, for a few social workers, high caseloads. While there has been some improvement in key areas of practice in the service, such as the timeliness of some assessments, this improvement is very recent.

Senior leaders and managers have a realistic view of the quality of practice, which remains too variable and is not yet consistently good. Most of the areas for further improvement found within this visit had already been identified through a range of performance monitoring, case audits and external reviews. However, although inconsistency in thresholds for initiating child protection processes had been identified, no specific steps had been taken to develop more consistent decision-making at the front door.

Families in Wandsworth benefit from a strong early help offer which is well matched to their needs. Decisions around thresholds are proportionate following child protection enquiries or assessments. While no children reviewed during the visit were left at risk of harm, the current level of demand on the assessment service is compromising the quality of practice in some cases. Senior leaders are putting in place plans to address this area for improvement identified during this visit.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- Seeking and recording parental consent for enquiries when appropriate.
- The understanding and application of thresholds for initiating child protection processes.
- Partner engagement in strategy discussions and strategy meetings.
- The timeliness of assessments for children in need.

Findings

- Too many families are subject to a high level of initial statutory intervention which is not always matched to their needs or proportionate to the presenting risk. In the week prior to the inspectors' visit, only one strategy discussion found that the threshold to start child protection enquiries had been met, and most ultimately led to child in need assessments. While more children in Wandsworth are now subject to child protection enquiries overall, significantly fewer children are requiring a child protection plan. This means that some children and families only receive the right level of help after being subject to processes which should only commence by the most serious of concerns for children.
- Consent for checks within the front door is too routinely overridden and, even when parents and carers are contacted, consent is not always clearly explained, or their views are not accurately recorded. Professionals' intent to request early help and parental consent to share information on this basis is not always respected by managers within the front-door service. Some low-level contacts and requests for early help are subject to further enquiries and some progress to statutory interventions without there being enough evidence of how thresholds have been met.

- Inspectors found delay in processing some contacts within the front door; for some children, this meant a delay in their needs being assessed or for other families a delay in being provided with help and support. The current performance information used by senior managers is being improved so that it can more accurately reflect the timeliness of decision-making in the front door service.
- Police co-located in the front-door service expressed concerns to inspectors about the low threshold for strategy meetings initiated by the front door team. Team managers in the receiving assessment service are not always challenging threshold decisions made at the front door and, as a result, some children and families are being subjected to child protection processes which are not proportionate to risk.
- Partner information-sharing and participation in strategy meetings are too variable. Notably, the participation of key health professionals remains underdeveloped, despite some recent progress. As a result, decisions are not always well informed. For instance, health visiting information is too often missing when considering risks to very young babies. Some records of strategy meetings do not always make clear the nature of the harm to children or why it is significant. In better examples seen, strategy meetings were well attended by key agencies and there was a comprehensive analysis of risk.
- The quality of assessments is not yet consistently good across all teams. Children are not always visited promptly at the start of the assessment and the high caseloads for a small number of social workers are affecting their capacity to complete assessments within timescales that match children's needs. Social workers and managers are doing their best to prioritise the most urgent work, but on occasion this comes at the cost of work which may appear to be less urgent.
- Most child protection enquiries are detailed and child-centred; they identify the risks to children and result in immediate safety planning where required. Children's assessments are mostly comprehensive, analytical and informed by skilled direct work with children. Social workers' abilities to build relationships with children and parents is a real strength. A very small number of assessments were not detailed in their consideration of risks to children. However, thresholds applied following child protection enquiries and assessments are proportionate and progression to child in need planning or initial child protection conferences is timely.
- Senior managers have recognised the need to develop wider support for families during an assessment and have introduced a weekly 'interface' meeting where decisions can be made for early help staff to start working alongside social workers. A specialist domestic abuse worker based in the service is helping to support robust safety planning for children and victims of domestic abuse.

- Families benefit from a broad early help offer that is appropriately targeted at the right level of need for children. Concerted efforts are made by the early help service to engage families, and when risks or needs increase, cases are stepped up appropriately from early help to children's social care.
- Corporate support for children's services is evident in the improved joint-working with housing to meet the needs of 16- and 17-year-old young people presenting as homeless; young people are given the option to be accommodated if they are found to be in need and this is in line with their wishes. A range of 'edge of care' services are helping to ensure that very few young people present in a crisis.
- The out-of-hours arrangements provide children and families with an effective service. Police protection powers are used only when necessary and are followed by prompt strategy meetings to consider the next steps to protect children. Young people in police custody receive appropriate out-of-hours support and the provision of accommodation when necessary.
- Management oversight of casework is providing clear and timely direction for social workers, but in a very small number of cases managers do not yet robustly challenge less effective practice. Management oversight at key points in the child's journey is not always noted on children's records, although managers who spoke to inspectors had detailed knowledge of the progress of children's cases.
- Social workers told inspectors that they enjoyed working in Wandsworth and were positive about the support from team managers and regular personal supervision. Staff really value the 'open door' approach of senior managers, including the director's 'breakfast' sessions. Attendance at training by social workers is prioritised by managers, despite the high volume of work in the service overall.
- Senior managers make increasingly good use of performance data and findings from quality assurance activities. Some team managers are using weekly performance reports alongside social workers to improve core social work practice and a positive culture of performance being 'everyone's business' is developing.

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

Yours sincerely

Brenda McInerney
Her Majesty's Inspector