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Dear Sally

Focused visit to Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council children's services on 29 and 30 October 2019. The inspectors were John Roughton, HMI, and Steve Lowe, HMI.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for contacts and referrals in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH), thresholds for children in need and child protection, and arrangements for children and families stepping down to early help and to the Initial Response Service (IRS) for social work assessment.

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

Overview

The quality of work in responding effectively to contacts has improved since the last inspection in 2017. This is positive for children and families in Walsall, who receive a timely response to initial identified needs and concerns. The local authority response to most children at risk of harm or in need of help is appropriate, although, for some children, consideration of early help support could be given sooner by referring agencies. Also, the availability of health information when screening new contacts sometimes leads to delays in responding quickly to children's needs. Management oversight, quality assurance and performance information arrangements have been strengthened, with managers ensuring that work is appropriately prioritised and progressed. Leaders have a good understanding of their strengths and areas for improvement, with aspirational plans in place to effect positive change. The local authority is aware of the need to strengthen its arrangements with the police in response to children who go missing.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The timeliness of early help assessments and interventions.

- The consistency, timeliness and quality of return home interviews.
- The timely availability of health information in the MASH.

Findings

- The local authority's MASH has improved since the last inspection. Working arrangements are well embedded and well organised, and there are effective governance and processes in place. Inspectors found evidence of sustained and improved partnership working between children's services and their partners, including the police and domestic abuse services. Health resources in the MASH are very stretched, and this leads to delays for some children in ensuring that important information is shared quickly enough.
- Management oversight is routinely evident in case records, and case direction is clearly recorded on contact forms. This ensures that workers understand the views and expectations of managers as well as the timescales within which work is to be completed. Contacts about children and families are appropriately and swiftly screened by social workers, who routinely research historic information and make use of effective chronologies to inform their recommendations. Information-sharing between most partners in the MASH is timely and thorough, and clear analysis is undertaken by workers. However, the recording of consent by partners when contacting the MASH is inconsistent. The local authority had recognised this issue in advance of this visit, and is taking steps with partners to ensure that this improves. There remain a number of contacts that do not meet the threshold for a children's social care intervention, where early help support could have been considered first. The very recent implementation of the safeguarding partnership's 'Right Help, Right Time' guidance and associated training is beginning to address this. Early signs indicate that more contacts are now appropriately made.
- Children and families in Walsall are able to benefit from a broad early help offer from across the wider partnership to respond to their identified needs. Skilled and experienced family support workers offer a range of interventions. However, some children and families have to wait too long for early help assessments to start due to lengthy screening processes in the early help hub and capacity issues in locality teams. The outcomes and progress of early help assessments are not consistently tracked to ensure that children's needs are being fully understood and responded to promptly and effectively. However, the low re-referral rate for children's cases being stepped up to social care over the last six months indicate that children and families are receiving help at the right level. When concerns escalate, cases are appropriately and promptly stepped back up to the MASH, and timely action is progressed.
- Contacts about children at risk due to domestic abuse are all initially screened by police and women's aid partners promptly in the MASH. However, the threshold for police to refer into the MASH is too low, which diverts screening

staff from their priority work. When appropriate, social care, women's aid and police colleagues share information quickly and effectively, ensuring a prompt response to identified needs.

- Children and families benefit from the strong relationship between the out-of-hours emergency duty team (EDT) and the MASH. Children's experiences are gathered well by EDT workers, and this helps to inform effective decision-making by MASH managers on the following day.
- Too many children in Walsall who have been missing from home or care do not receive a return home interview (RHI). When they do, they frequently do not take place within appropriate timescales. This is due to the lack of timely police notification when children return, current capacity issues linked to the recent changes in police reporting arrangements, and a consequent increase in demand. The local authority is responding to these issues through dialogue with police colleagues. Increased resources are shortly being deployed to improve experiences for children and to ensure their needs are understood and responded to. Information is appropriately shared between agencies on a daily basis with respect to children who remain missing. Actions are set and agreed to reduce and manage risk. More analysis is needed to consider whether information from RHIs could inform the wider strategic response to missing children.
- Clear and effective procedures, process maps and guidance documentation supports staff in the identification of and initial response to children at risk of sexual or criminal exploitation and gang affiliation in Walsall. All children assessed as being at serious (high) or significant (medium) risk of harm from child sexual exploitation are considered at multi-agency sexual exploitation meeting (MASE).
- Children at risk of significant harm are appropriately identified in the MASH, and timely strategy discussions are held, well attended by partner agencies. The effective multi-agency response means that children's needs are addressed and children are safeguarded.
- Assistant team managers (ATMs) in the IRS service provide social workers with high-quality directions when children are allocated to them. Social workers receive clear advice regarding the areas to be covered in the assessment, and the timescale for reviews. Reviews take place regularly and these are equally well recorded. Children are always seen as part of the assessment process and their voices inform assessment outcomes. Assessments are thorough, and include appropriate analysis that informs subsequent actions. The ATM rationalisation for decisions made are well recorded.
- Managers employ an effective range of methods to scrutinise and review the quality of work in the MASH, and make good use of available performance

information to prioritise and monitor the timely progression of work. Audits undertaken appropriately identify issues requiring action, although greater oversight is needed to ensure that these actions are completed, and that wider learning from audit findings informs practice. The experienced, skilled and stable staff group feels well supported and is positive about the MASH structure and working arrangements. Staff value the regular supervision they receive. Staff are well informed and can access a range of good-quality training and professional development opportunities. This is contributing to a stable workforce that is committed to improving practice.

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

Yours sincerely,

John Roughton
Her Majesty's Inspector