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Dear Mr Macilwraith

Focused visit to Sheffield City Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Sheffield City Council children's services on 9 to 10 November 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Neil Penswick, Louise Hollick and Louise Walker.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for the 'front door'.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. Inspectors were on site and meetings were organised in accordance with COVID-19 safety guidance.

Headline findings

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Sheffield children's services has seen a rise in demand for its services at all levels of need. As a result, the council had to temporarily increase its expenditure in order to ensure that services were able to respond to that increased demand. Managers also had to focus on enhancing the support and management oversight for the essential aspects of social care services. A highly detailed improvement plan, coordinated through a multi-agency improvement board, was shared with inspectors and accurately identifies the strengths and weaknesses of the services. In the main, inspectors' findings were positive, in that they observed that decision-making and follow-up action are timely and of an appropriate quality, although these are not consistently well recorded.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice?

- The pace of implementation of the improvement plan, relevant to the findings of this visit.
- The quality of recording, particularly in respect of concerns when consent has not been given by parents and in relation to the work done with families.
- Sharing of information with other agencies following domestic abuse management meetings.
- Ensuring that the voice of the child is sought and their views considered in plans.

Main findings

Children are receiving appropriate and effective interventions from the Early Help service. Workers are absolutely committed to the ethos of offering 'the right support at the right time' and demonstrate how their interventions are making a positive difference. Some children have to wait for a short period for a service. However, managerial oversight ensures that those with immediate need are responded to promptly and that children's circumstances continue to be reviewed. The process for stepping down cases from social care to Early Help is well embedded and this ensures that continued support is available for children and families when needed. The quality of the written documentation does not always reflect the actual work that is being carried out.

Senior managers have ensured that the safeguarding hub, which is the front door service, is well resourced to ensure that there is a robust response to meet the immediate needs of children and families. Multi-agency colleagues are part of the service and participate in the information gathering and screening to identify which agency would be best able to address the needs of individual families.

Contacts are screened appropriately, with consideration given to previous social care involvement and shared multi-agency information. Consent is explored and explicitly recorded. Families are contacted, their views sought and next steps discussed. Professionals are able to contact the front door for advice. However, when no consent is given by a family, if there are no child-protection concerns, the discussion is not recorded. This potentially results in children's services not having an accurate chronology of concerns raised about children.

The majority of referrals detail information well, including the response by children's social care and the liaison with other agencies and families. Written managerial oversight also provides clear guidance on the actions to be taken. However, a small number of recordings, including some of those completed by out-of-hours staff, are not consistently of this standard.

There are daily multi-agency domestic abuse (MADA) meetings to share concerns and draw up safety plans in relation to higher-risk situations. These meetings are well attended by partner agencies and focus well on coordinating safety-planning and ensuring that the child is at the centre of those plans. Schools are made aware of domestic abuse concerns as part of the national Operation Encompass programme. Although schools do not attend the MADA meetings, information is sought from them. At present, they are not routinely contacted after these meetings, which would further enhance the delivery of identified risk management plans.

In the main, social-work assessments are of a good quality, covering both the presenting concerns and the previous history. In many cases, good-quality direct work with children is evident, adding to the understanding of the children's experiences and what they want to happen. However, in a small number of assessments, there is either a lack of direct work with the children or their voices are not evident.

Assessments for disabled children identify the children's needs, the impact of their disability on them, and also the impact on their siblings and parents. In a small number of cases, records are not as holistic and in depth. Cultural and identity needs are identified and sensitively managed. Social workers who spoke to inspectors have a good grasp of the child's experiences and have spent time building relationships with children and advocating on their behalf.

Child-protection decision-making is clear. Urgent multi-agency meetings are convened, and appropriate actions taken to safeguard children. Prior to inspectors being on site, senior leaders reported that they were reviewing the reasons for an increase, during the COVID-19 pandemic, in the number of children being subject to a strategy meeting that did not result in follow-up child-protection activity. Inspectors evaluated a number of these cases and found that, in the main, these were children who were already receiving appropriate multi-agency support and the convening of a strategy meeting was not necessary either under national guidance or to meet the needs of the child. Senior managers are continuing to address this practice, including carrying out audits, having discussions with partner agencies and delivering further training.

Senior managers made inspectors aware that the local authority designated officer (LADO) arrangements are subject to development work, due to issues with the service. Inspectors reviewed a number of recent referrals and concurred that several issues remain. These include confusion regarding the role of the LADO, who often appears to be investigating rather than coordinating the activities of others, and the lack of a robust evidence trail of documentation. In a small number of cases, separate concerns about individuals have not always been linked together and this has resulted in a lack of consideration of all the relevant issues.

During the pandemic, there has been an increase in the number of children coming into care on a planned basis in response to concerns about parental care and home circumstances. For the very small number of children who have come into care in an

emergency, there has been a swift and appropriate response by children's social care, and follow-up assessment and planning work has been timely.

Throughout this focused visit, inspectors recognised the service described to them by senior managers prior to being on site. This demonstrates a good understanding by managers of the services, which have been under increased pressure during the pandemic, and a realistic understanding of what needs to be done. Services are evidently stretched due to the increased demand and the impact of COVID-19 on Sheffield communities and the multi-agency workforce. Management oversight is evident and, in the main, is resulting in appropriate and timely services that meet the needs of families.

Social workers who spoke to inspectors reported that they have been well supported during the pandemic and that they have continued to receive regular and supportive supervision, which they much appreciate. They reported that their caseloads have risen but all are manageable. Regardless of the pandemic, they all spoke positively about working for Sheffield. This includes newly qualified social workers, who also reported having protected workloads with tailored support offered.

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

Yours sincerely

Neil Penswick
Her Majesty's Inspector