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Dr Mac Heath
Director of Children's Services
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Dear Dr Heath

Focused visit to Milton Keynes local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Milton Keynes local authority children's services on 15 and 16 November 2023. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Sarah Canto and Jan Edwards.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need, including those children who are subject to a child protection plan.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including case discussions with social work assistants, social workers and managers. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.

Headline findings

The senior leadership team is continuing to build on progress made since the previous inspection in 2021. Senior leaders, politicians and partners have worked collaboratively to focus on bringing about positive change for children. Services for children in need and children subject to child protection plans, including disabled children, are improving but are not consistently strong. Recent and substantial financial investment has resulted in a number of improvements. These include an increase in staffing in family support teams to meet the needs of rising numbers of children in need and those subject to plans, alongside an additional layer of senior managers to sharpen management oversight and the review of children's progress. A multi-agency contextual safeguarding team has been launched successfully to address gaps in services for children who experience harm outside of the home. Following a recent move to bring the disabled children's service under the umbrella of children's services, a significant investment plan is now in place to bring about improvement for disabled children in the coming months.

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

- The timely and effective escalation of concerns when risks increase.
- The quality of audits and the subsequent impact on improving practice.
- Management oversight, including of children subject to pre-proceedings.

Main findings

Families have access to a range of effective and valued wraparound family support services to promote children living in their own homes where possible. However, unaddressed superficial engagement by parents and insufficient focus on the progress of children mean that children are at risk of not having the right level of intervention and support. Alongside this, children's experiences of cumulative harm have not always been fully considered when determining next steps for child in need plans. Senior leaders are currently working closely with health partners to achieve a systematic approach to identifying and tackling neglect in families.

The quality of assessments to ensure that children's needs are understood is variable. Some are comprehensive and most include the views of children, parents and professionals, which help to inform the next steps for children. However, some assessments do not synthesise all the information available relating to children's history and their present circumstances, meaning that planning is less effective.

Children's plans identify many of the most important issues but are not always specific enough about what needs to happen next. In some cases, plans also lack contingency arrangements, which would help families to understand the expectations of them and what would happen if progress were not made.

The quality of practice in meeting the needs of disabled children is variable. When parental engagement has been limited and safeguarding concerns exist, the response for these children is not always timely enough, or consistently robust. For other children, they are supported well by their social worker and enjoy positive relationships with them. There is some management oversight of social work assistants who support disabled children in need, but this tends to be limited to assessment and supervision. Senior leaders have plans to increase the capacity of the teams, with the intention that all statutory work will be allocated to qualified social workers, in line with guidance.

Overall, the coordination of services for children and their families receiving direct payments and short breaks is appropriate. However, due to a shortage of staff, a small number of children are responded to by duty workers under the guidance of a manager. The monitoring of these children and their families outside of their reviews is not systematic, so responses to some actions are delayed.

When children are at risk of significant harm, strategy meetings are convened appropriately. These meetings are well attended by a range of multidisciplinary

professionals who provide a comprehensive overview of children's individual circumstances. Records show the history of social care and agency involvement, with multi-agency consideration of risk accompanied by a clear rationale. Discussion and analysis inform next steps, and actions are detailed and clear, although timescales are not always set to enable progress to be reviewed effectively.

Children's conferences are well attended by parents and professionals, with effective multi-agency information-sharing that is specific to each child. When children become subject to child protection planning, appropriate engagement and persistence from social workers help to bring about changes to children's lives. Core group meetings are well attended and purposeful and attendees' views are well documented.

Children attend their meetings when possible and are encouraged to share their views. However, it is not always easy to see the progression and improvement for children against their plans.

Children are visited regularly and are seen alone in line with their needs. Observations of children in their home environment are described well, providing a window into children's interests and presentation. The reason and focus for visits, and how they link to the plan, are not always clear. Recordings do not always describe what life is like for children, as there is a tendency to focus more on adult issues. Records are increasingly being written to the child and are becoming more meaningful for the children themselves.

For children subject to pre-proceedings under the Public Law Outline, the lack of rigour in the process of oversight and scrutiny has led to some significant drift and delay. Some parents are given repeated opportunities to engage in the process, despite evidence of a lack of commitment; this is not in the child's best interests. Leaders had already identified this issue and have started to take action to address this delay through closer monitoring, keeping a tighter focus on the pace of change. Pre-proceedings letters tell parents what the concerns are and what needs to change to keep children safe. The language in pre-proceedings letters does not align with the local authority's positive ethos of working alongside parents. This may have a negative impact on the successful engagement of parents in this process.

The local authority's new 'contextual safeguarding' team was established earlier in the year as a targeted response to growing concerns about the increase in harm to children outside of the home. This team has been very effective in supporting the reduction of the risk of harm and improving outcomes for children. Highly skilled and knowledgeable social workers demonstrate tenacity and positivity in successfully and quickly building relationships with vulnerable children, some of whom have not engaged well with other professionals in the past. Social workers work creatively with children to produce comprehensive assessments and achievable safety plans that are meaningful and led by the child. Time is taken to understand children's interests, and this leads to well-thought-out multidisciplinary plans with realistic opportunities of

diversion to new routines and behaviours. Families are engaged positively, whenever possible. Children's progress is reflected well through supervision and the team's expertise is shared across other teams, with some joint working across services.

When children go missing from home, they are offered a timely return home interview. However, the records of interviews indicate that information relating to previous episodes of going missing and other factors are not sufficiently considered to inform planning to reduce the risks that children face.

Much attention has been given to improving the quality assurance framework and involving social workers and team managers in considering practice improvement. The quality of audits is improving, although auditing practice is not consistently strong. Some audits show a lack of professional curiosity and include actions without timescales. Leaders are addressing this by providing training for auditors and increasing moderation activity so that managers have a more reliable understanding of the quality and impact of practice.

Supervision takes place regularly. While social workers told inspectors that they find supervision helpful and that it provides them with space to reflect, this is not always seen in written records or action plans.

Social workers describe supportive managers, teams and visible senior leaders. Staff feel valued and experience positive training opportunities and support. They appreciate the focus on career progression from an early stage.

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

Yours sincerely

Sarah Canto
His Majesty's Inspector