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Dear Mr Vasic

Focused visit to Halton Borough Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Halton Borough Council children's services on 24 and 25 July 2018. The inspectors were John Roughton, HMI, and Andy Waugh, HMI.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for contacts and referrals in the integrated contact and referral team (iCART) and thresholds for children in need and child protection, with a focus on children and families stepping down to early help.

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 November 2014. This is positive for children and families in Halton, who receive a timely and proportionate response to initial identified needs and concerns. The local authority response to children at risk of harm or in need of help was appropriate in all cases that were seen at this visit. However, partners do not always effectively capture the voice of the child when contacting the local authority. Strategy discussions have access to all information necessary to support decision-making, although relevant partners are not always included in these discussions.

Management oversight, quality assurance and performance information arrangements are particularly strong, with managers ensuring that work is appropriately prioritised and progressed. This also means that senior leaders have a clear sight of trends and emerging issues.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- Partners do not always effectively capture the voice of the child when contacting the local authority.
- The involvement of relevant partners in all strategy discussions and the clear recording of all agreed actions.
- The use of data and information collected from return home interviews when children have been missing in order to inform the strategic partnership response.

Findings

- The local authority's iCART has improved since the last inspection. It is now well organised and works effectively. Inspectors found evidence of sustained and improved partnership working between children's services and their partners when screening contacts, including police and health colleagues, domestic abuse services and, more recently, children and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS).
- Contacts about children and families are appropriately screened in the iCART. Information sharing between partners is timely and thorough, with quality analysis undertaken by workers who use a strengths-based practice model to support the appropriate application of thresholds and swift referral on to the relevant service for assessment.
- Children and families in Halton benefit from a broad early help offer from across the wider partnership in order to respond to the identified needs of the child. Skilled and experienced family support workers offer a range of interventions, and the outcomes and progress of Common Assessment Framework (CAF) plans are tracked to ensure that children's needs are being responded to effectively. The low re-referral rate for children's cases coming back to social care over the last 12 months indicate that children and families are receiving help at the right level. However, when concerns escalate, cases are appropriately and promptly stepped back up to the iCART and timely S47 enquiries are progressed.

- Contacts about children at risk due to domestic abuse are all initially screened by police partners in the iCART. The quality of information recorded by officers attending incidents is improving, supported by continual training, although the impact of the domestic abuse for the child is not yet consistently considered by referring police officers. Social care and police colleagues share information quickly and effectively. Support for children is identified at an early stage, and there are interventions in place to manage risk. This often happens while perpetrators are still in custody. The commissioned domestic abuse service provides a comprehensive range of services to support children and families, whose positive feedback evidences its value and impact.
- Children and families benefit from the co-location of the out of hours emergency duty team (EDT) with the iCART. This enables the iCART to swiftly progress referrals in response to concerns that are dealt with out of hours. Children's voices are gathered well by EDT workers, and this helps to inform decision-making by iCART managers the following day.
- The circumstances of children in Halton who have been missing over the previous week are reviewed thoroughly at a weekly multi-agency meeting. Young people's individual circumstances are discussed, and information is shared between agencies, identifying actions to reduce and manage risk. Actions are clearly recorded with timescales for their completion, and progress is reviewed at subsequent meetings. All young people are offered a return home interview (RHI), with 75% taking place within timescales. Where young people are not engaging with the commissioned RHI provider, the allocated social worker carries out the interview themselves in order to ensure that there is a clear understanding of reasons for missing episodes and that associated risks for individual children are understood and acted on. However, the aggregated information from RHIs is not routinely used to effectively inform the wider strategic response to missing children.
- Children at risk of significant harm are appropriately identified in the iCART, and strategy discussions are held within 24 hours. Relevant partners are spoken to and consulted during the iCART screening process, which informs strategy discussions. Actions recorded have suitable timescales, although they are not always fully reflective of the discussions and analysis and do not routinely apply a strengths-based approach to inform analysis and decisions. However, in all cases seen by inspectors, children were appropriately safeguarded.
- Strategy meetings are routinely held when children are injured, are at risk of sexual exploitation, or where complex situations have been identified. These meetings routinely include appropriate agency attendance. The quality of the information shared is thorough and enables agencies to understand the child's experiences. Effective risk assessments and contingency plans are put in place, including the use of police and legal powers to safeguard children when

necessary. Actions are clear and child focused, with specific timescales for completion.

- Management oversight is routinely evident in case records, and case direction is clearly recorded on contact forms, ensuring that the views and expectations of managers and timescales for work to be completed are clear and understood by workers. Managers have access to live performance reports that enable them to track the progress of work. The experienced, skilled and stable staff group feels well supported and staff are positive about the iCART structure and arrangements. Staff value the regular supervision they receive. They 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.
- Managers employ an effective range of methods to scrutinise and review the quality of information sharing, decision-making and the appropriate application of thresholds in the iCART. A particular strength is the quality of auditing of contacts, further enhanced by the fortnightly 'Contact Challenge Meeting'. This is a multi-agency group that audits 10 cases at each meeting, identifying thematic learning to support practice improvement. For example, targeted dialogue with relevant schools has taken place to reinforce the importance of timely contact with the iCART where they may have concerns for a child, and has led to a focus on improving the recording of parental responsibility and consent.

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