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Ms Emma Bennett
Director of Children's Services
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Dear Ms Bennett

Focused visit to City of Wolverhampton council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to the City of Wolverhampton council children's services on 11 and 12 September 2018. The visit was conducted by Alison Smale and John Roughton, two of Her Majesty's Inspectors.

Inspectors evaluated the local authority's arrangements for children in need and those on child protection plans. Inspectors considered the experiences and progress of children open to assessment and locality hub teams.

A range of evidence was looked at. This included holding case discussions with social workers, reviewing case records and observing practice. Inspectors also scrutinised relevant local authority performance management and quality assurance information.

Overview

Assessments undertaken in the assessment teams are timely and completed to a good standard. Aligned to the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH), the assessment teams complete assessments referred to children's services. This means that timely decisions are made to ensure that children and families are signposted or allocated a worker in early help or children's locality teams depending on their level of need.

Children in need and those on child protection plans are allocated a social worker in one of eight locality team hubs. Inconsistency of practice both within and between locality teams means that while some children and families receive good social work intervention, too many children's plans are characterised by insufficient purpose and

progress in meeting needs. Many children's assessments in locality teams are not updated in the light of emerging needs. Social workers do not spend enough time with children to build trusting relationships to inform their work with families, and plans do not set out well enough how children and families will be helped, and how their needs will be met within timescales appropriate for children. This means that in some cases children are not receiving a good enough service and that they wait too long for their circumstances to improve. For children living in households where chronic neglect is an issue, this means that historical factors are not sufficiently weighted, and that children remain subject to recurring neglect for too long.

Locality team hubs have experienced significant pressure in the face of high staff turnover and significant difficulty in recruiting and retaining social workers and competent team managers. These have affected the quality of management oversight and direction in several locality teams. Combined with unacceptably high caseloads for social workers in some locality teams, the effectiveness of social work practice has been compromised in some cases.

Senior managers recognise that until staffing difficulties are resolved, more needs to be done to ensure that social work practice improves the lives of vulnerable children and families. Senior managers have developed a clear, thorough plan to ensure that increased and sufficient support is immediately provided to teams where performance or staffing issues mean that children are more vulnerable. This includes additional management oversight, which will include support and coaching to less well performing teams, and a review of all child in need and child protection cases to improve plans.

Findings

The location of assessment teams alongside the multi-agency sharing hub (MASH) enables a smooth and timely transition without delay for cases progressing from referral to assessment. Threshold decisions are appropriate in most cases and are informed by strong multi-agency information sharing. Consent is sought appropriately from families. Children's needs and risks are accurately identified at an early stage. Where children are at risk of significant harm, effective action is taken to ensure that they are safe. In a very small number of cases seen that involved long-term chronic neglect, children's needs should have been considered by a multi-agency child protection conference following a child protection enquiry instead of social work support as children in need. This meant that they did not benefit promptly from multi-agency planning and intervention and their parents received an insufficiently clear message about the level of professionals' concern.

The quality of assessments undertaken by assessment teams is consistently good. Most are well written, with a clear evaluation, and strengths and risk factors routinely and explicitly identified. Use of historic information ensures that the assessment incorporates and takes account of the past experiences of children and families. Assessments are holistic, and address different aspects of the child's lived experience and factors which influence parenting, with well-informed analysis and

conclusions. This results in children being provided with the right immediate help at the right time, and their circumstances improve.

Assessment team social workers complete assessments with the involvement of families, which means that most families accept the assessment findings and recommendations. In most cases, fathers are actively involved in the assessment. Children's voices and lived experience are clear, captured through direct work or through ascertaining the child's wishes and feelings in the majority of cases. Issues of identity and its impact for families and children are insufficiently explored. This means that aspects of the child's culture and place within their family and community are not fully understood.

Where there are indicators of potential child sexual exploitation, social workers do not make early enough use of a specialist screening tool when assessments are first being completed. Delays in potential child sexual exploitation risks and vulnerabilities being recognised and addressed mean that risks may escalate unchecked. During this visit, some evidence of this was seen. The local authority has recently introduced a gangs screening tool. This is a positive development, but it is not yet consistently used. While action is taken, some individual risks are not fully understood by professionals or young people, and the information is not collated for wider strategic intelligence.

Pre-birth assessments carried out by designated social workers in one of the locality teams are a strength. Clear and well-written pre-birth assessments involve partners and families, and use tools effectively to engage with families to aid evaluation. Relevant research is referenced to inform conclusions and analysis, leading to clear recommendations. This is enabling the local authority to ensure that these families receive the right help and to forward plan effectively for those unborn children most vulnerable to significant harm at birth.

As work with children and families proceeds in locality team hubs, most children's assessments are not updated often enough. This means that the majority of assessments do not sufficiently reflect the changing or emerging needs of children and families. As a result of this, plans are not always informed by an up-to-date assessment of need or risk. In a small minority of cases seen, assessments had been recently updated with the support of advanced practitioners. These assessments were of good quality, with clear insights into the lived experience of children, identifying strengths and areas of concern, involving parents and using the local authority's restorative practice approach. These assessments were also informed by powerful use of direct work and very strong evidence from children about relationships and their emotional status.

Plans are not sufficiently clear and they lack clear enough objectives and timescales. Progress is difficult to measure. Parents cannot be clear about what is expected and what outcomes are to be achieved to make a positive difference to the lives of their children. Progress is not articulated sufficiently in plans. The lack of meaningful contingency planning means that there are no benchmarks or actions agreed should

progress not be achieved or if situations deteriorate. Children in need plans are not always up to date or in place. This means that children make progress as appropriate services are put in place to support families, but a lack of clear focus limits the pace of improvement in children's circumstances. No cases were seen where children were left in unsafe or in unacceptable environments. In some cases, children in need plans are not in place, but, nevertheless, work to meet their needs is ongoing and is of benefit.

Child protection plans are too variable in quality. Inconsistency in the detail of plans drafted at child protection conferences means that many lack sufficient detail and clear purpose, although better examples include specific objectives and desired outcomes. This means that it is not sufficiently clear for many parents what they need to do to change and improve their parenting. This delays progress for children in having their needs met.

Core groups and child in need planning meetings are held regularly for most children. Key participants attend most multi-agency meetings. Information is shared and updated, but plans are not sufficiently developed as more becomes known about families. Where plans lack sufficient outcome detail, these do not sufficiently capture progress and change for children. This means that decisions about whether sufficient progress is being achieved for children are not sufficiently grounded in recorded outcome evidence.

Workloads for more experienced social workers in assessment teams have recently reduced following a period of being unacceptably high. Positively, the morale of social workers in their first year of practice in these teams is high as they have the benefit of reduced and protected caseloads. Management oversight in the assessment teams is evident in all cases, and this results in timely, good-quality assessments. Supervision records are clear and reflective. Social workers in these teams feel supported by managers and they receive regular supervision, which they find reflective and helpful.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

In locality team hubs, many assessments do not sufficiently describe the changes and emerging needs being experienced by children and families.

Plans are not sufficiently effective in reducing needs. They do not adapt to changing circumstances. Actions to address children's unmet needs are not sufficiently clear or specific. Nor do they include achievable actions and outcomes.

Social workers in some locality teams experienced excessively high caseloads until very recently, including social workers in their first year of practice. This has impacted on social workers' ability to see children enough and the quality of work with families. Staff have raised this with managers, but it was not addressed by managers quickly enough.

While supervision is regular in locality team hubs, and social workers value the support they receive, supervision is not being used effectively to improve practice. Supervision is not sufficiently detailed or reflective. It does not ensure that sufficient progress is made in children's cases. There is a lack of follow-up on actions agreed in supervision, partly due to changes in frontline managers. The supervision template does not help managers to work in the restorative strength-based approach which the local authority has implemented.

The local authority recognises that the audit programme is not applied consistently enough, and compliance is not robustly enforced. The two-tier approach to audit is potentially a strength as it provides clear moderation and should enable social work reflection and for children and families to benefit from improved social work practice. Lack of compliance with the audit process has limited its effectiveness to sustain better practice. For social workers, audits are process focused, and for some practitioners it is not used as an opportunity to reflect but to get files up to date in advance of the audit. This undermines the local authority's ability to get a true reflection of social work practice. While audits were balanced and evaluative, bringing reflection and critical analysis, auditors do not sufficiently engage with social workers and this is a missed opportunity to improve practice.

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

Yours sincerely

Alison Smale
Her Majesty's Inspector