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Dear Mr Vasic

Focused visit to Halton children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Halton children's services on 23 and 24 November 2022. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Vicky Metheringham and Andy Waugh.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for the 'front door'. They also looked at the quality of management oversight, and whether performance management information and quality assurance activities provide managers with an accurate view of social work practice to help senior leaders improve outcomes for children.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. Inspectors were on site for the visit.

Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including children's electronic case records, performance management information, case file audits and other information provided by senior leaders. In addition, inspectors spoke to a range of staff including senior leaders, partners and social workers.

Headline findings

Halton children's services' previous focused visit took place in March 2021. Inspectors made areas for priority action following the identification of significant weaknesses in social work practice and the lack of management support and supervision. Since then, a determined and recently appointed chief executive officer has secured corporate commitment and significant financial investment to children's services in their drive to improve social work practice for children in need of help and protection. The development of a newly established senior leadership team has begun to accelerate the much-needed pace of change to the local authority's improvement journey.

When children in need of help and/or protection are referred to the front door in Halton, effective management oversight of information provides clear direction for social worker practice. Workers undertake detailed information-gathering activity which informs the next steps. As a result, children and families benefit from timely interventions and support which are proportionate to the presenting issues. Effective emergency duty social workers provide children with support and safety when risks escalate on an evening or weekend. However, the sustainability of the current responsibilities and remit of the emergency duty team manager would benefit from review, including the support and access to Halton senior leaders in emergency duty decision-making.

The quality of social work assessment practice has improved since the previous focused visit. Social workers make swift and frequent visits to children and families. Robust management oversight of practice at the point of social work allocation provides social workers with time-bound actions and clarity about what is expected of them. However, while this practice has improved, not all actions directed by managers are consistently reviewed. Social workers have regular supervision; however, the written supervision does not record or review progress against all the agreed actions.

While there has been some work to improve the local authority designated officer arrangements, these are still not robust enough and this has resulted in a delayed response from the designated officer in a small number of cases.

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

- The quality of social workers' supervision, including management oversight of agreed actions.
- The robustness of local authority designated officer arrangements to monitor actions.
- Senior management access and support in emergency duty decision-making.
- The quality and consistency of audit practice.

Main findings

Since the ILACS inspection in March 2020, the duty and assessment team has moved and is now co-located in the multi-agency front door, known as the integrated contact, and referral team (iCART). This facilitates early allocation to social worker practitioners for children and families who need help and support or protection.

Thresholds by partners are understood. Their referrals to the iCART contain pertinent information which supports timely decision-making so that children do not experience delay. Referrals are timely and direct conversations between professionals and social workers in the iCART ensure that effective advice is provided to support them when they have a concern about children. Consent is usually sought

from families prior to contact being made with the iCART. However, professionals in the iCART do not consistently inform referrers of the outcome of their concerns.

Managers in the iCART provide detailed oversight of the presenting information and set time-bound actions at the outset so that workers are clear about what they need to do to inform their screening activity. Most contacts are considered within agreed timescales. When the review of contacts exceeds these arrangements, managers review the presenting issues to mitigate risk to children.

Workers in the iCART undertake robust screening activity. This includes detailed consideration and analysis of historical information. Workers routinely complete multi-agency checks with other professionals which aid their decision-making about the outcome of the contact. Workers consistently contact children's parents to discuss the concerns that have been shared, to seek parents' views and to ensure that they have given consent for further action. Consent is appropriately dispensed with where there are child protection concerns.

Workers provide well-informed, clear recommendations about what support and services children require. Managers oversee and authorise social workers' written records and provide clear narrative to support decision-making and record the rationale for the next steps. As a result, children and their families are provided with timely support and services that are proportionate to their needs.

When children are re-referred to children's services, or the outcome is for no further action, management oversight provides a detailed narrative about what steps are required. When no further action is deemed necessary, written records provide an explanation about how this decision has been reached. Workers analyse the previous concerns and the impact of parental capacity on the current concerns and consider the presenting information and risk effectively.

Robust management oversight of contacts is helping to embed the consistent application of thresholds. Children and families are appropriately diverted to early help support and are provided with services and interventions while the early help multi-agency assessment and plan are being completed. This helps to prevent children and families' cases unnecessarily escalating to statutory services as they are provided with timely and proportionate support.

The emergency duty service provides a timely and proportionate response to the escalation of risk to children. Emergency duty workers consider information from the child's records and analyse the family history and current circumstances. Workers provide prompt responses to concerns raised and proactively gather information from referrers and talk with children. Workers make efforts to see children and their parents and develop robust interim safety arrangements for children. Detailed case recording ensures that there is effective handover to daytime services, which prevents delay being incurred. The emergency duty team manager, despite their

extensive responsibilities and remit, ensures that there is management oversight of practice, and they oversee out-of-hours decision-making. The service provides out-of-hours support to Halton and another local authority, with one individual team manager being on call during evenings and weekends. Senior managers provide limited support to emergency duty decision-making.

Strategy meetings are arranged in a timely way when children are identified as being at risk of harm. Children's cases immediately transfer to the duty and assessment team, and children are quickly allocated to a social worker. Inspectors identified that practice has recently been adapted so that children are not inappropriately seen prior to the agreed strategy meeting being convened to ensure that action is not being taken prior to sharing of all the relevant information by key agencies. Strategy meetings are well attended by partner agencies, and they provide an effective platform for sharing information, considering historical information, presenting concerns and analyse risk and its impact on children. Strategy meetings recommend timely actions about what work needs to be completed and agreement is made about whether a child protection enquiry is required.

Subsequent child protection enquiries are timely and detail the outcome of the work that has been completed. They contain updated information about children's circumstances, consider children's individual needs and provide a holistic assessment of the family. Children's views are gathered and inform the outcome of child protection enquiries. Case recordings of visits are written to children using language that they and their families can easily understand. The decision about whether a child protection conference is required is well informed and children's records provide a detailed rationale about the next steps, which managers oversee.

When a child in need assessment is recommended, managers in the duty and assessment team rigorously oversee social work allocation. They provide very detailed guidance for social workers with direction about what children's assessments should focus on and they develop time-bound actions which include visits to children. While some assessment practice benefits from a manager undertaking a 10-day review of activity, which further strengthens management grip and helps to prevent drift and delay for children, this approach is not yet consistent. Some managers make a specific management direction that a child in need meeting should be convened if an assessment goes beyond 15 working days; however, this practice standard is also not consistently embedded.

Social workers in the duty and advice team develop early relationships with children which enable children to share their worries. Social workers complete creative, direct work through timely and purposeful visits to children and gain their wishes and feelings. Social workers routinely contact other agencies as part of the assessment process and engage in planned and productive discussions with parents' and children's wider family. Assessments are written to children and contain detailed information and an analysis of risk.

There has been some work to improve the local authority designated officer arrangements to support consistent application of threshold. The designated officer ensures that allegations against professionals are appropriately reviewed with partner agencies. However, designated officer arrangements do not always result in timely action. A tracker used to monitor cases has not always accurately recorded referral dates or subsequent action, resulting in a small number of cases where a response has been delayed. Furthermore, the arrangements for designated officer cover at times of increased demand or annual leave are not robust enough and have, in a minority of cases, contributed to a delay in a timely response from the designated officer.

The chief executive has implemented a range of mechanisms, including face-to-face meetings with social workers, to ensure that he has a detailed and thorough understanding of the effectiveness of senior leaders and the quality of practice. The significant financial investment made by the local authority has enabled the recruitment of key leaders to the local authority's senior leadership team. As a result, the director of children's services is now supported by a leadership team which is beginning to support improvements to social work practice. Improvement activity is closely monitored and tracked by effective externally chaired improvement board meetings and robust Department of Education adviser led support, both of which provide additional scrutiny to leaders.

The local authority's updated self-assessment provides an accurate reflection of key areas of improvement work and areas for development. It is well informed by senior leaders' evaluation of the quality of practice and analysis of performance data and leaders understand where improvements are needed. Senior leaders are taking proactive steps to embed their chosen practice model and have secured sector-led improvement support to implement this approach. Social workers are greatly enthused and are genuinely looking forward to developing this practice model.

A revised performance framework, supported by enhanced governance arrangements, ensures that the chief executive and executive member are well informed and hold senior leaders to account through scrutiny of the performance data. This renewed focus on performance and data is beginning to support managers to monitor their performance. Leaders are realistic and acknowledge that the performance and audit framework are not well established. They have secured training and development opportunities to support managers to undertake consistent audit practice.

Senior leaders recognise that the workforce is a key priority and have taken decisive and creative steps to recruit and retain staff. The development of the 'Halton Offer' is beginning to attract staff to work for the local authority. Social workers enjoy working in Halton and this is supported by the recent staff survey and staff feedback to inspectors. Social workers feel well supported and engaged with senior leaders

about the improvement journey and value the communication from them. Staff report that the training they access supports the quality of their practice and that their caseloads are manageable. They report that supervision is reflective and supports their practice. However, written supervision records do not reflect the richness of discussions that workers reported and lack time-bound actions. This makes it difficult to ensure that social workers are working through plans and that all key decisions for children are clearly recorded.

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

Yours sincerely

Vicky Metheringham
His Majesty's Inspector