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Dear Ms Dutton

Focused visit to Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council Children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council children's services on 30 and 31 October 2018. The inspectors were Diane Partridge, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Sheena Doyle, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Inspectors considered the local authority's arrangements at the first point of contact for children who need help and protection. Specifically, they considered decision-making in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH), the effectiveness of child protection enquiries and the MASH response to specific groups of vulnerable children. They also considered the effectiveness of early help services.

Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers in the MASH and child protection teams and early help case managers. They observed multi-agency meetings and looked at local authority performance management, quality assurance information and children's case records.

Overview

Knowsley's children's services were last inspected by Ofsted in 2017, when the overall effectiveness of services was judged to require improvement to be good. Strong, committed senior leadership and good corporate support have ensured that the progress seen at that inspection has been sustained and built on. The local authority's understanding of the quality of practice in this area of the service is

accurate. It is informed by regular performance clinics, quality assurance of practice through auditing of case work and external scrutiny and challenge. This, alongside investment into business support systems and additional staffing, has maintained a momentum of improvement at the 'front door'.

Inspectors found effective social work practice within the MASH, which also benefits from co-location of a wide range of partner agencies. Information-sharing is prompt and application of thresholds in the MASH is consistent and appropriate. Partner agencies are engaged effectively in holistic planning for children. Consequently, children in need of help and protection in Knowsley receive a timely, proportionate and effective response from the MASH, which improves their situation.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- Consistency in the quality of assessments.
- The timing of strategy discussions in response to escalating concern to support better planning of child protection enquiries.

Findings

- Contacts to the MASH are appropriate and responded to quickly. Contact and referral officers are confident and skilled in their role. Experienced social workers collate and effectively analyse available information to inform their recommendations about next steps for the child. Consent is routinely sought or, where appropriate, dispensed with. Managers maintain effective oversight of the work of their team and actions taken.
- Well-attended multi-agency meetings make appropriate decisions for children based on effective information-sharing. The quality of decision-making is enhanced by the professional expertise of the partner agencies involved and a shared understanding of thresholds. As a result, children receive timely help that is proportionate to their level of need.
- The multi-agency 'Shield' team is highly effective in responding to child sexual exploitation, child criminal exploitation and children who go missing from home or care. Excellent engagement of a wide range of partner agencies is resulting in improving circumstances and reduction of risk for these children. For example, in the last 12 months the number of children who have gone missing from home has reduced and agencies have been successful in progressing a criminal prosecution to court. A range of agencies are providing well-coordinated and sensitive help to children who are victims of sexual exploitation and their families, to support them through criminal court processes, and to maximise the opportunity of securing convictions of perpetrators.

- Inspectors saw appropriate and immediate action taken through close partnership working for children in need of immediate protection. Out of hours services respond appropriately and proportionately to the reported concern. Interim safety plans keep children safe until daytime services take over. Effective communication between out of hours and daytime services ensures that safety plans are updated in a timely way to maintain safety for the child.
- Strategy discussions involve all appropriate agencies. Relevant information is shared and decisions about next steps are proportionate to risk. There is good consideration of children's needs as well as the risk posed to them. For example, inspectors saw that mental capacity was appropriately considered for a child with learning difficulties in planning a child protection enquiry. However, in a small number of cases, strategy discussions should have been held sooner in response to escalating risk. In a few cases, strategy discussions were held prematurely, before sufficient information was available to inform decision-making.
- Child protection enquiries are timely, thorough and reflect a clear analysis of risk with reference to significant harm. Children are seen and spoken to quickly. Social workers spend time with children and use creative direct work to gain their wishes and feelings, which are considered in safety planning. When appropriate, children are directly engaged in safety planning and have their own plan that helps to keep and make them feel safe. Relevant agencies contribute to keeping children safe.
- Assessments are detailed in their description of what is happening in children's lives. Most consider family history as a predictor of the future. However, not all sufficiently analyse the child's current situation in the context of their family history, and lack clarity about parents' capacity to change and what needs to happen to improve the child's situation. At the time of this visit, the local authority had already identified greater consistency in the quality of assessments as an area for improvement and the principal social worker is leading practice development sessions to achieve this.
- Case summaries and chronologies are a strength. They are valuable tools that are used well to enhance understanding of the child's story and to inform current interventions to help and support them.
- Social workers and case managers receive regular supervision which they value. They report that it is of good quality and provides opportunity to reflect on the impact of their practice on the child and their own professional development. Management oversight through supervision is effectively formulating plans and actions within timescales appropriate for the child.
- Social workers and case managers appropriately recognise the factors that make children more vulnerable. Inspectors saw robust responses to children

experiencing domestic abuse, with effective multi-agency working that is helping to reduce risk. Effective use of a range of assessment tools is starting to enhance the quality of analysis in assessment about the cumulative impact of neglect on children.

- The local authority has enhanced its early help services, which are provided by the Family First service. Assessments completed by case managers in this highly effective service are comprehensive. Children's needs and risk of harm to them are well considered. This results in outcome-focused and regularly reviewed support plans that improve children's lives and, in some cases, prevent the need for the involvement of statutory services. Effective communication between the MASH and Family First ensures that children and their families receive a service that is proportionate to their needs.
- Allegations of abuse, mistreatment or poor practice by professionals are taken seriously and are appropriately responded to. The designated officer is suitably experienced and very knowledgeable about the local authority area. Due consideration is given to the three parallel strands of criminal investigation, employment issues and child safeguarding concerns. Multi-agency meetings are attended by all relevant parties. Meetings are well documented, with clearly ascribed actions and timescales and result in effective risk management.
- The local authority has clear and robust performance management arrangements in place that enable managers and senior leaders to understand the nature of the work, in terms of demand, complexity and quality of practice.

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

Yours sincerely

Diane Partridge

Her Majesty's Inspector