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Dear Ian,

Focused visit to West Berkshire local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to West Berkshire children's services on 11 and 12 December 2018. The inspection was undertaken by Maire Atherton and Kate Malleson, Her Majesty's Inspectors.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children who need help and protection. Specifically, they considered the work of the Contact, Advice and Assessment Service (CAAS), the response to contacts and referrals, including decision-making within the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH), and the quality of assessments. They also considered transfers in early help services, the effectiveness of child protection enquiries and the MASH response to specific groups of vulnerable children.

Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records and case discussions with social workers, managers, partner agencies based in the MASH and early help practitioners based in family hubs. They looked at the local authority's performance and quality assurance information.

Overview

Decisions made when children are first referred to children's services are appropriate, correctly overseen by managers and lead to prompt and effective action to safeguard children when this is necessary. Since the last inspection, the co-location of partners in the MASH has enabled more efficient and effective information-sharing. Children who do not reach the threshold for statutory services may be referred to other agencies for support, but there is no mechanism to ensure that recommended actions, such as team-around-the-child meetings, take place.

Strategy meetings and discussions are timely. They mostly involve the right partners and reach appropriate decisions based on historic, as well as current, information. Police notifications to children's social care about incidents of domestic abuse are prompt and inform an appropriate assessment of risk levels. There has been steady progress in improving the local authority response to children who go missing from home or care, or who are vulnerable to exploitation.

Changes in the senior leadership team have been well managed and have not had a negative impact on the quality of practice seen during this visit. Senior leaders have identified that further work is needed to fully implement the new early help strategy. They have also recognised that improvements are needed in the audit system.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- Decisions arising from contacts and referrals so that families and agencies are clear about, and implement, the actions needed to improve children's circumstances.
- Assessments, so that they actively consider the impact of diversity and culture on children and families' experiences in order to inform planning and intervention for children.
- The auditing process, so that it evaluates the impact of practice on children's experiences and progress.

Findings

- The system for responding to contacts is timely, safe and effective. The management of information received from a wide range of sources, including the local authority out of hours service, is efficient. Referral information is usefully augmented by checking other local authority systems and is passed to qualified social workers for triage.
- Work in the CAAS triage team is timely and is progressed with due consideration of the level of risk and by gaining parental consent when needed. The application of thresholds is consistent and appropriate. There is effective management oversight of all decision-making and this is well recorded. The co-location of partners supports multi-agency working. Although some partners are only physically present in the office for part of the week, this has promoted closer working relationships and improved their understanding of thresholds in CAAS.
- When contacts do not progress, the family is sent an outcome letter, signposting them to relevant agencies. The letter is also copied to other agencies when it is considered they may have a role, for example a recommendation to a school to

form a team around the child. However, there is no system to ensure that these recommendations are completed and that the children's needs are met.

- Significant risks are immediately escalated to ensure that children are safeguarded. Most strategy meetings are properly constituted and are timely. The well-prepared partners share comprehensive information, and this is recorded by dedicated minute takers. The minutes demonstrate that historic factors are actively considered alongside current circumstances. Thresholds are understood, and clear actions arise, with timescales detailed. Children are seen, often on the same day, with safety plans put into place when required.
- Assessments are generally strong. They consider the history of families and are undertaken at a pace that is responsive to children's identified needs. For example, in one case seen by inspectors, the assessment was completed in one week. This enables families to access the right support at the right time. During the assessment, there is a prompt response to emerging concerns and appropriate escalation when necessary. Children's voices and experiences are central to the assessment and are actively taken into account in the recommendations when possible. Assessments demonstrate social workers' awareness of a range of risk factors and use research to inform conclusions. However, the consideration of children's diversity and culture in assessments is limited.
- The response to domestic abuse notifications is sound. There are well understood and implemented systems, informed by effective partnership working, that ensure the right level of response to safeguard children. This can include an intervention at the MASH stage by a specialist worker from the Targeted Intervention Services team, who encourages families to engage with the appropriate services.
- When children go missing, effective partnership working provides oversight which informs next steps. Workers know the children, and the careful consideration of their circumstances leads to appropriate safeguarding action. Timely information-sharing between police and the missing coordinator ensures that missing children are located quickly. Information gained from return home interviews informs police disruption activity and helps professionals to understand children's networks and associations. Incidents of going missing are clearly recorded on both police and CAAS systems so that further episodes of going missing can be assessed with full knowledge about previous incidents.
- The monthly Exploited, Missing and Risk Assessment Conference (EMRAC) is effective. There is a range of appropriate disruption, protective and engagement strategies in use, together with relevant risk assessment tools. Contextual safeguarding information is shared with partners, informing wider safeguarding activity.
- Where there are concerns that children may be at risk of exploitation, time is taken to understand the complexity of whether risky behaviours are 'normal'

adolescent behaviours or whether they involve more significant harm requiring intervention. Risk assessment tools are used effectively by support workers to explore the identified risks with parents and children. The tool could be improved by including a prompt to staff to explore alternative risk factors to children, such as parental pressure to achieve or lack of parental attention.

- Children's risks, actual and potential, are seen as a whole and responded to as required. There is awareness of the wider range of risks, for example trafficking and female genital mutilation. There is recognition that there can be more than one type of vulnerability at the same time or at different times, and risks are not seen in isolation.
- Although there has been a delay in the full implementation of plans for the coordination and evaluation of early and targeted support, the provision of early help has been maintained. Family hubs provide early help work effectively in partnership with other professionals and the voluntary sector. This enables families to improve outcomes for children without the need for statutory intervention. There is an established, well-understood and implemented step-down process that supports families as they move on from statutory involvement. The early help work is mainly successful in achieving the objectives agreed with families to secure the changes made. Where children need to move up from early help to a statutory service, there is no secure audit trail to record the information shared or the response to the referral.
- Strong management oversight is evident throughout the work in CAAS. Managers' recorded comments provide a well-considered rationale for decision-making.
- Staff describe managers as available and approachable. They are very appreciative of, and complimentary about, the quality of management support and supervision. Managers provide challenge to improve practice and performance in the best interests of children. Staff caseloads are manageable, despite the volume and fast pace of work.
- Senior leaders gather and use performance data well to aid their understanding of their services and identify key areas for action. They recognise that quality assurance through the audit process is underdeveloped. Auditors do not routinely offer significant challenge with a view to improving practice or outcomes for children.

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

Yours sincerely

Maire Atherton
Her Majesty's Inspector