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10 November 2017

Mr Tony Oakman
Deputy Chief Executive and Strategic Director – People
The Council House
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Dear Mr Oakman

Monitoring visit of Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Dudley children's services on 11 and 12 October 2017. This was the fourth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged to be inadequate in April 2016. The visit was carried out by Pauline Higham and Margaret Burke, Her Majesty's Inspectors.

The local authority continues to make positive progress in improving services for children and young people.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the area of children in need of help and protection. Additionally, inspectors reviewed the quality of social work practice.

The visit considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, supervision records and observation of social workers, team managers and independent reviewing officers (IROs). Inspectors also spoke to parents and senior managers.

Overview

The local authority, with the full support of its senior leaders, elected members and partners, remains self-aware and continues to improve. The implementation of the local authority's improvement plan is resulting in positive progress. Social work practice continues to improve and this means that more children, particularly those in need of help and protection, receive an improved service. Children seen by inspectors are receiving sufficient levels of support and protection to minimise and manage risks. An effective model of social work practice is consistently applied and

reinforced by managers. The impact is positive and the quality of work to help and protect children has improved.

Although rates of staff turnover are reducing, sustaining a stable workforce continues to be a challenge. Just under a third of children's social workers are agency staff. The recruitment and retention of team managers remain particularly challenging, and this means that in a small number of children's cases management oversight and decision-making are not consistently effective or timely. As a result, planning for these children is not as robust as it needs to be.

The local authority has worked hard to develop a positive learning culture by creating and supporting an environment of change where social workers can improve their practice. The training and mentoring programme for managers continues to support practice improvements alongside now well-established quality assurance activity that has a positive influence on practice. Weekly chief officer briefings continue to be well received and further contribute to a positive working environment.

In some areas of practice, the pace of change is swift. However, the local authority knows that there is still more to do to ensure that all children in Dudley receive consistent help and support of a good enough standard.

Findings and evaluation of progress

In all of the cases seen, children are safe and in the vast majority of cases receive appropriate levels of support and protection. A very small number of children have waited too long to have their needs assessed, and some are not seen regularly by their social workers. The local authority is aware of this and has taken appropriate action to ensure that visits are undertaken and recorded in a more timely way. Overall, social work practice continues to improve. Social workers are committed to the children they work with, and many social workers spend time getting to know their children well. Social workers use a number of direct work tools effectively to understand children and, as a result, children's views are better understood and their plans are increasingly more reflective of their needs.

Contacts and referrals to children's social care are well managed, and thresholds for intervention are applied consistently. This ensures that children in need of help and protection are identified and that they receive timely and appropriately targeted support. Processes to manage and assess cases within the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) are clear and effective. Good oversight and decision-making of contact and referrals by both team managers and social workers are well supported by effective integrated multi-agency involvement.

Strategy meetings held in the MASH are timely and effective, and involve all relevant agencies. However, for a small number of children who may be at risk of significant harm and whose cases are allocated in care management and assessment teams,

initial child protection case conferences are not held as quickly as they should be following a strategy meeting. Child protection conferences and core groups are well attended, and partner agencies contribute positively. Children's plans are appropriately focused on the needs of the child and they clearly detail the actions that must be taken to improve children's circumstances. Children and parents are invited to meetings and supported by social workers and IROs to contribute meaningfully.

Assessments are not yet consistently good, although more recently assessments have improved and are beginning to underpin and inform children's plans. Stronger assessments contain relevant historical and multi-agency information. They consider and take account of the views of children and their parents or carers. Social workers are increasingly aware of clearly articulated practice standards, and this is starting to have a positive impact on practice. They now understand and appreciate the need for assessment to be informed by full and meaningful engagement with children and their families.

There has been a significant improvement in the impact of the work of the IROs. They now offer appropriate support and challenge to social workers, team managers and senior managers. Most disputes are resolved at an informal level, and this is resulting in improved outcomes for children. Team managers and social workers accept child-focused constructive feedback and challenge from IROs, which is a positive cultural shift in the workforce. Caseloads for social workers and IROs continue to reduce to manageable levels. However, work remains to ensure that this is consistent across the service.

Social workers and managers are very proud of their work, and they remain dedicated and committed to improving services for children in Dudley. The local authority continues to focus on professional development and a positive culture where the needs of children are paramount. Senior leaders and managers know that further improvement must be made to ensure that all children receive consistent and timely support. The local authority remains steady and methodical in its approach to address the actions in its improvement plan, and this work is beginning to make a positive difference to children.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you and your staff for your positive engagement with the programme of monitoring visits. I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Pauline Higham

Her Majesty's Inspector