

Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231
Textphone 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/ofsted

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Mr Steve Peddie
Executive Director, Families & Wellbeing
Sankey Street
Warrington
WA1 1UH

Dear Mr Peddie

Focused visit to Warrington children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Warrington children's services on 31 January and 1 February 2018. The inspectors were Lorna Schlechte HMI and Neil Penswick HMI.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need and children subject to a child protection plan. Inspectors looked specifically at:

- thresholds
- step-up/step-down between children in need and child protection
- children on the edge of care
- children subject to a letter before proceedings and the quality and impact of pre-proceedings interventions
- children in need at risk of family breakdown.

Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, which included case discussions with social workers, managers and child protection chairs and a detailed discussion with a parent. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information, and children's case records. The findings in this letter relate only to the cases seen during this visit to the local authority.

Overview

Children in need of help and protection receive a service that is mostly timely, proportionate and keeps them safe. The local authority provides child-centred, focused support to families who are experiencing difficulties. Children at risk of family breakdown and on the edge of care receive a broad range of targeted multi-agency interventions to help build resilience and improve outcomes. The focus of work with children who are stepped down from a child protection plan to a child in need plan is not always evident in the child's record. The rationale for decision-making against progress made is sometimes unclear or is too reliant on parental self-reporting. In some cases, this leads to uncertainty about outstanding work to keep children safe. Further work is required to ensure that the quality of assessments and plans for children is consistently good.

Findings

- The threshold for intervention for children in need and those subject to a child protection plan is mostly applied at the right level. Decisions are timely and ensure that the right support is in place to bring about change and reduce the risk of harm. Management oversight in relation to child protection enquiries is clear and appropriate, and strategy meetings involve the relevant professionals. For most children subject to child protection enquiries, initial child protection conferences are timely. Where there is a significant risk of harm, swift action is taken and children are safeguarded, for example by extended family promptly becoming involved to provide additional support and respite and by children becoming looked after.
- Children are visited regularly. Social workers take time to understand children's daily lived experiences and they mostly record their observations effectively. This ensures that the child's views are sensitively considered and that they inform assessments, plans and reviews. The needs of children with disabilities are well explored, which ensures that interventions are tailored appropriately and take account of complex needs and vulnerability. These factors result in social workers and support workers providing effective direct work with children and families. This is purposeful and has clear objectives to achieve sustainable change.
- Children experiencing neglect, sexual abuse, physical abuse and emotional abuse receive a wide range of targeted support to identify need and ensure that they are helped and protected. A neglect tool is increasingly used well with families to recognise and respond to neglect.
- Children at risk of family breakdown, or who are on the edge of care, often receive a range of timely, creative and focused support from the families first team. Staff are committed to building strong relationships with the most vulnerable children and families and use a range of tools and outreach activities to engage and support them. This has led to increased resilience within families,

to cope with challenging situations, improved outcomes, and a reduction of risk for some children. A therapeutic social worker based in the team also offers valued advice, support and expertise to support the most complex cases. This ensures that workers engage families in the most effective, timely and appropriate interventions to bring about positive change.

- Children benefit from regular reviews of their plan, which ensures that work is progressed in a timely way. Two child in need co-ordinators track the quality and timeliness of child in need plans, chair review meetings and liaise with partners, including a police officer based in the families first team. The role of the child in need co-ordinator is at the early stages of development and further work is underway to develop a consistent approach across the service.
- There is evidence of effective partnership working in child protection conferences, core groups and child in need meetings, which ensures that the work of key professionals from health, education and police is focused and appropriate to emerging need. When progress is too slow for children in need, including those subject to child protection plans, their cases are stepped up at the right time.
- For those families for whom progress has not been sustained on a child protection plan, letters before proceedings set out concerns and actions for parents and the local authority in clear, accessible language. They include information on the support that will be provided, with timescales and contingency plans in place if progress is not achieved. Family group conferences are held increasingly with families to identify sources of support and alternative solutions to reduce escalation of risk. Members of the wider family are consulted appropriately on the support they will provide and this has led to improved outcomes for some children. Public Law Outline meetings are held regularly and provide effective oversight of progress to ensure the timely preparation of evidence as appropriate.
- The local authority is aware of its key challenges in relation to securing a stable, skilled and experienced workforce. There has been a reduction in the number of social work vacancies and reliance on agency staff through implementation of a revised recruitment and retention strategy. This is an improving picture and staff seen during this visit were positive about working for the local authority, knew their cases well and felt supported by their managers. This includes a significant number of staff in their assessed and supported year in employment (ASYE) who feel well supported by a dedicated ASYE co-ordinator.
- Caseloads are manageable and this enables social workers to respond to children's needs through regular visits and direct work. Managers use a caseload management system to monitor and review workloads, taking into account the level of family complexity and social work experience. This ensures that caseloads are regularly reviewed and most do not exceed the expected limit without a clear

rationale. Further work is underway to develop a strength-based approach to social work practice, although the pace of this has been too slow.

- Management oversight is evident on the case record and most key decisions are signed off at the right time. Supervision sessions with social workers are regular, task focused and sometimes include reflections on practice. Peer supervisions are offered to some staff to discuss and progress children's cases and this supports appropriate decision-making for children. Performance is regularly scrutinised and ensures that progress for the most vulnerable children is well understood and informs service development.

Areas for priority action

There are no priority actions following this focused visit.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- Although the number of children subject to a child protection plan has reduced in line with statistical neighbours, children are sometimes stepped down from a child protection plan too soon and before all outstanding tasks are completed. The conference minutes are not always clear about whether all the objectives from the plan have been delivered, what the remaining risk is and what work needs to be completed on a child in need basis to ensure that progress is sustained. In a small number of cases seen, children had been stepped down from a child in need plan to early help or universal services before three months had elapsed, which is contrary to the local authority's own practice standards. This led to some cases being closed prematurely, which, in a small number of cases seen, led to further referrals.
- Assessments vary in quality. Some are very reflective and detailed but others lack focus, are not timely and a small number are not signed off by a manager. The quality of chronologies to inform assessments is mixed and not all are sufficiently detailed or reference historical factors in children's lives. This level of inconsistency does not assist the social worker to evaluate the context of incidents and parental behaviours.
- The quality of plans is variable. Some plans seen are of a high standard, with clear objectives, and include regular updates of progress at core group or child in need meetings. Other plans seen are very basic, too general in tone and lack clarity or detail in relation to actions, timescales and contingency arrangements. This means that it would be difficult for some parents to clearly understand and engage with what they need to do to affect change for their family. The rationale behind children remaining on child protection plans for two years or more is not always clear in the case record or conference minutes.
- A recently revised auditing framework has been implemented. Audits are mostly accurate and highlight relevant issues in relation to social work practice.

However, not all audits have clear action plans in place to ensure that remedial actions are addressed within a reasonable timescale for children.

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

Yours sincerely

Lorna Schlechte (Lead Inspector)

Her Majesty's Inspector