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Dear Colin

Monitoring visit to Birmingham City Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Birmingham City Council children's services on 9 to 10 May 2017. The visit was the first monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in November 2016. The team was Dominic Stevens and Jenny Turnross, Her Majesty's Inspectors.

The local authority is making steady progress, and has taken some important steps in improving services for its children and young people.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the area of help and protection, with a particular focus on referral and assessment arrangements, the application of thresholds for intervention, and services to children at risk of sexual exploitation and those who go missing from home. The visit considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, observation of referral and advice officers, social workers and managers undertaking referral and assessment duties, focused meetings and other information provided by the local authority. In addition, inspectors spoke to family members currently receiving services and a range of staff, including managers, social workers and administrative staff.

Overview

Since the last inspection, leaders and managers have worked hard to make a range of necessary improvements including successfully further embedding some well-established strength-based approaches to practice within an overall relationship-based model of social work. Although substantial further progress is required before services are consistently good, in a number of key areas children in Birmingham are

receiving better and timelier services. Against a long-standing history of failing to provide good services for children, this represents notable progress. Improved management oversight and good use of learning from practice evaluations has been central to achieving this improvement. When concerns about children's welfare are referred to the children's advice and support service (CASS), most are dealt with promptly. Improved management oversight is now ensuring that almost all children receive the right level of service. For a few children whose cases were considered by inspectors, earlier opportunities to intervene and provide help have been missed, consequently recent involvement has been triggered when chronic problems have become acute. When children are at immediate risk of significant harm, this is quickly recognised and effectively responded to. A minority of children assessed as being at lower levels of risk continue to experience some delay in receiving services. Better alignment between CASS and the Assessment and short-term intervention teams (ASTI) is helping to ensure that, when children's cases are passed to the ASTI teams, social workers quickly become involved and go out to visit them.

Improvements in management direction and oversight, along with more consistent use of a strength-based approach, mean that assessments of children's need are now largely completed without delay. In addition, assessments are now more child focused, with an improved quality of analysis in most cases. From a low base, the focused efforts by the authority and its partners have improved the quality of services for children and young people at risk of sexual exploitation and for those who go missing. Although much work still remains to be done for these services to be good, more children are now being offered and receiving return home interviews. Multi-agency meetings to consider the needs of children at risk of sexual exploitation are now considering cases in a timely manner and performance information and intelligence is being used more effectively.

Findings and evaluation of progress

The local authority's practice evaluation document is being used effectively to understand and improve the quality of frontline practice. When inspectors reviewed the work undertaken with individual children, they found that evaluators' findings accurately reflected the strengths and weaknesses of casework to a great extent and that required improvement actions were appropriate to children's individual circumstances. Not only is this tool being used effectively with individual social workers to help them to improve their practice, but it is also being used in a targeted manner, for example in CASS, where aggregated findings have been used well to help focus improvement activity and drive up quality. As part of the wider approach to staff development and alongside consistently regular supervision and generally manageable caseloads, this has helped to ensure that staff understand and identify with the local authority's improvement agenda. Morale in the workforce is generally good.

The arrangements for receiving referrals about children in the CASS by telephone work well, and have improved since the inspection. The work of referral and assessment officers who receive telephone contacts is now overseen and guided by qualified social workers, who appropriately make key decisions. Referral information is being effectively recorded on the electronic case recording system, and a further improvement is the more routine recording and consideration of parental consent.

When referrals arrive in the CASS by email, the process for dealing with them works well, in most cases. However, for a few children, delays in uploading information means that assessments of children's needs are not always started as promptly as they could be. The CASS monthly performance scorecard is a positive development, but requires further development to have the desired impact. The inclusion of data analysis, targets and benchmarking information would support further improvements in performance.

Managers' oversight of children's cases and their grip on both decision making and workflow have improved. A new twice-daily report of all contacts being worked on has considerably enhanced managers' ability to monitor work and to ensure that children's cases are being progressed. Close, tenacious work with the police combined with a new procedure agreed with the police in October 2016 has resulted in there being no backlogs of referrals about children living in homes where there is domestic abuse being considered and dealt with. Children who are the subject of such referrals are now considered by the CASS within the same timeframe as all other referrals. This is a significant improvement, and it means that the potential for children to be living in situations of domestic abuse where risk is unassessed and they are not seen by professionals is managed and minimized.

Improved management oversight, alongside an increased use of a strength-based approach to practice, is making a positive difference. It is helping to ensure that 'threshold' decision making about what level of service is right for individual children is more child focused and appropriate in a large majority of cases. When children referred to CASS are at immediate risk of significant harm, this is quickly recognized in almost all cases. Child protection strategy discussions are held swiftly. They are routinely attended by the majority of key partner agencies. When appropriate, one of the child sexual exploitation coordinators who are based within the CASS attends meetings to support decision making about this vulnerable group of young people. Ensuring the attendance of relevant education staff within strategy discussions remains both a challenge and an area for development. The rationale for decisions and necessary actions is generally clearly recorded, and supports focused planning and next steps.

The relatively new system of ASTI team managers chairing strategy discussions for those children who will be allocated to their teams has contributed to better information sharing and alignment between the work of CASS and ASTI teams. This means that both initial decision making and plans for future work with children are likely to be stronger. Inspectors saw the positive impact of this and of a stronger use

of strength based techniques in assessments of children's needs and risk. The lack of a single record of a strategy discussion document which can be shared easily with partners means that it is not always clear if agreed actions have been completed. When discussions about children who may be at risk take place between police officers and the out-of-hours emergency duty service, records do not routinely show whether such discussions are a formal strategy discussion. This limits the ability of staff in CASS and social work teams to fully understand the perceived level of risk or the status of any actions agreed.

At the time of the inspection, multi-agency discussions about children assessed as being at a medium level of risk were not being used to best effect. The number of such meetings is much reduced, and a higher proportion of children are now, dependent on their level of need, either being referred straight through to an ASTI team or for their situation to be the subject of a strategy discussion. Despite this reduction in delay, at the time of the visit 12 children were still waiting up to five days for such meetings to take place.

While children who are at immediate risk of significant harm are almost always responded to quickly and threshold decision making within CASS is generally appropriate, in a small minority of cases the impact of chronic patterns of risk and neglect is still not fully understood. In these few cases, concerns were responded to with early help services, advice or sometimes no further action, when the cumulative pattern of concern should have warranted a statutory social work service. As a consequence, recent involvement has been triggered when chronic problems have escalated, become acute and children have needed a more urgent response. Positively, once an assessment has commenced, the services to support children are provided without delay.

Historically, services for children and young people at risk of sexual exploitation and those who go missing were weak and poorly aligned. From this low base, some notable progress has been made in the past seven months. This includes important elements, such as the creation of 'missing' and child sexual exploitation performance scorecards, and much closer alignment and consideration of the risks identified between these two areas of work. Work and information sharing with the police have improved. While substantial further progress in the quality of services for children is needed, these developments provide a necessary foundation for further improvement.

The delays of up to five months for children and young people to be considered at multi-agency child sexual exploitation meetings (MASE) that existed at the time of the inspection have been successfully reduced. Almost all children are now considered at MASE meetings within one or two weeks, depending on their level of risk. Child exploitation screening and risk assessment tools have recently been relaunched and additional guidance provided to staff. The frequency of their use is now more widespread, although further work is required to fully embed them in

practice and to ensure that they are used in a consistent manner. An audit of this is planned, but is yet to commence.

The use of management information related to child sexual exploitation and going missing is beginning to improve the impact of services. Information, such as the geographic prevalence of both going missing and sexual exploitation, a breakdown by the school attended and the level of risk of sexual exploitation of missing children, is beginning to help the local authority and partner agencies to better target their work. However, this work is still very new and requires further development. For example, the local authority does not currently have a full understanding about changes in the level of risk to children over time, and this limits its understanding of how effectively the services are reducing risk.

An increasing number of children and young people are being offered return home interviews when they return from going missing. More of these interviews are happening within 72 hours and a higher percentage are being copied into children's electronic case files, so that they can be used to inform planning for those children. Despite this progress, numbers are still low. Less than half of the children and young people who went missing between the start of January and the end of March 2017 received a return interview. Of these, just over half were completed within 72 hours and, by the end of March, only a third had been included in children's electronic case files.

I should like to take this opportunity to thank you and your staff for your positive engagement with this monitoring visit. Although substantial further progress is required for services to be good, I am pleased to be able to report the steady progress that has been made in improving services to children in Birmingham. I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Dominic Stevens
Her Majesty's Inspector