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Ms Merlin Joseph
Director of Children's Services (Interim)
Oldham Council
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Dear Ms Joseph

Focused visit to Oldham children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Oldham children's services on 13 and 14 March 2018. The inspectors were Shabana Abasi, HMI, and Susan Myers, HMI.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for the front door. Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including having case discussions with social workers and managers, meeting a number of partners within the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) and attending a strategy meeting. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information, as well as children's case records.

Overview

The majority of children and young people reviewed as part of this focused visit received a timely and proportionate response when they needed help and support. When children's needs change and risks to their welfare increase, partners make appropriate contacts to the MASH. The majority of children who are in need of urgent help and protection are identified and receive a swift and effective multi-agency response. There is a current unacceptable practice within the service of social workers undertaking 'screening visits' to inform decision-making; the use of these visits is now to be reviewed. Assessments are timely. However, further work is required to ensure that the quality of assessments is consistently good.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The quality, consistency and child-centeredness of assessments.
- The efficacy and ethics of first contacts with families.
- Consideration and understanding of coercive control in cases of domestic abuse.
- The quality of social work responses to vulnerable adolescents, including those at risk of child sexual exploitation and self-harm.

Findings

- Children and families who need some additional support have access to a wide range of well-developed early help services. Those children and their families requiring more intensive early help support receive a good service that results in improved outcomes, such as increased attendance at school, less conflict in the home and more parental confidence in managing their child's behaviours.
- The majority of decisions to step up children's cases from early help to social care and to step down work from social care are appropriate. However, in some cases the referral was not specific enough about concerns or risks, detail of change or progress and what further work or support is needed.
- Social workers are undertaking 'screening visits' to some children and their families prior to a referral decision. The rationale for these visits is not clear. The local authority explained that these visits are an assessment. However, they are undertaken outside of the single assessment process and this means that families are being assessed without their knowledge or right to read, comment and have their views recorded, and this is unacceptable. In some cases, these visits led to a delay in children having their needs formally assessed and also meant that children and their families had to explain their circumstances to more than one worker in quick succession. Following discussions during this visit, the local authority intends to review the use of screening visits.
- The majority of information sharing from partners is prompt and of good quality. This is supported through co-location and effective partnership working. Decision-making is timely and the rationale for decisions is clearly recorded on children's electronic records.
- However, in a small number of cases, late or absent referrals from partners resulted in delays in assessing risks, determining needs and in the provision of timely intervention to children and families. There is a lack of proactive challenge of partners by the local authority and therefore there are missed opportunities for learning and improvement. Managers have effective oversight of all work within the MASH.

- Managers provide detailed oversight on all contact and referral decisions in the MASH. Threshold decisions made by social workers in the MASH are applied appropriately for most children, including decisions to look after children in emergency circumstances. For some children who are subject to child protection plans, the local authority missed opportunities to take more authoritative action, and this resulted in the police having to use emergency powers of protection to keep the children safe.
- When children are referred out of hours, the emergency duty team responds appropriately to contacts and communicates efficiently with the MASH. Recordings are timely, evidence actions taken and provide the detail of what further work is required to be carried out by the day service.
- Children at risk of significant harm are promptly responded to. Their needs are prioritised and cases are swiftly transferred to the child assessment team (CAT) to carry out child protection enquiries. Strategy meetings are timely and information sharing from relevant partners is used effectively. This leads to appropriate decisions and actions to protect children.
- Child protection investigations are timely and thorough, and they evidence clear information sharing and focus on risk.
- Management direction for allocation of assessments is a particular strength. Case allocation notes are clear and relate to the needs of the child. However, effective management oversight is less evident after allocation. Managers do not consistently review actions or timescales against plans. The quality of case discussions varies in detail. Risks are not routinely reviewed to inform decision-making or to progress case planning.
- While some assessments are of good quality, the majority do not include effective consideration of children's histories to inform analysis of risk, or sufficient analysis of the capacity of parents to do things differently in the future. Children's lived experiences, including family dynamics, their diverse needs, culture and identity, are not sufficiently explored.
- A small number of children are re-referred to children's social care for the same or similar issues when weaker assessments did not fully evaluate the risks to, and needs of, children or when cases were closed prematurely.
- Creative direct work with children was seen in early help cases. However, the voice of the child was not detailed strongly in other casework.
- Children and families experiencing domestic abuse have access to a number of effective intervention and support services. The independent domestic abuse adviser service is well integrated in the MASH and engages well with multi-agency partners to support effective safety planning for children and their families.

- The response to vulnerable children, including those experiencing domestic abuse or self-harm, and those children who are at risk of sexual exploitation, is variable. Some vulnerable children benefit from an effective multi-agency response, but for others their risk is not appropriately assessed and this results in their needs not being well addressed. Plans for children experiencing domestic abuse in their homes do not demonstrate that professionals, including social workers, have a full understanding of coercive control and how this impacts on family dynamics.
- Managers use a wide range of performance data to monitor and scrutinise front door workflows, including timeliness of decision-making, assessments and staff workloads. Social workers at the front door receive regular supervision. They have the opportunity to discuss their performance, development and welfare. Some records of strong, reflective supervision were seen.
- Senior managers have introduced additional resources to the MASH. This has increased management and social work capacity within the CAT. There are further plans to enhance capacity and reduce caseloads. Senior managers recognise that greater quality assurance activity is needed to focus on the quality of practice and the impact of how this is improving children's outcomes.

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

Yours sincerely

Shabana Abasi

Her Majesty's Inspector