

9 May 2018

Dawn Warwick  
Director of Children's Services  
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The Town Hall  
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Dear Dawn

### **Monitoring visit to the London Borough of Wandsworth children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to the London Borough of Wandsworth children's services on 21 and 22 March 2018. The visit was the seventh monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in December 2015. The inspectors were Emmy Tomsett, HMI, and Marcie Taylor, HMI.

The local authority is progressing well in improving early intervention and help and protection for children and families in Wandsworth.

### **Areas covered by the visit**

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the area of help and protection, including:

- the quality and timeliness of information gathering and decision-making within the initial point of contact (IPOC) team and in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH)
- the effectiveness of the recently introduced multi-disciplinary early help hub
- the understanding and application of early help pathways
- the effectiveness of assessment and planning for children in need of help and protection
- the quality of management oversight and challenge, and staff supervision in these services
- the accuracy and quality of the performance management information that is used by senior leaders and managers to oversee practice and improve outcomes for children

- the quality assurance of social work practice through auditing of casework and the contribution it makes to practice improvement.

Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, supervision files and notes, observation of social workers and senior practitioners undertaking referral and assessment duties and other information provided by staff and managers. In addition, we spoke to a range of staff, including managers, social workers, other practitioners and administrative staff.

## **Overview**

Senior leaders have made purposeful and well-targeted progress in strengthening arrangements at the 'front door', as well as in early help services. Pathways for referrals and early help have been more clearly defined and children now receive a swifter response to their needs. Decision-making for children is becoming increasingly timely and consistent. The local authority has demonstrated sustained drive and enthusiasm to ensure that services develop and, ultimately, that outcomes for children improve. However, there are several areas identified during this and previous monitoring visits that continue to need further improvement in order to achieve consistently better practice across the service.

## **Findings and evaluation of progress**

Based on the evidence gathered during the visit, we identified areas of strength, areas where improvement is occurring, and some areas where we considered that progress has not met the expectations in the local authority's action plan.

Since the last monitoring visit, senior leaders have significantly strengthened the early help offer. Pathways for families to access the broad range of early help services are now clearly defined and well understood across the borough. The local authority has invested in preventative services and, coupled with streamlining decision-making processes on contacts, this has ensured that children receive a swifter response to their needs.

The pathway into early help provision and statutory services is through the IPOC, which was established in October 2017. Professionals refer concerns using the early help assessment template, which has a focus on worries, strengths and actions. Social workers and managers in the IPOC make timely and proportionate decisions to progress work according to the presenting risks, including appropriate referrals into the early help pathway team when the threshold for statutory services is not met. When additional multi-agency information is required, representatives from police, health, education, early help and 'edge of care' services share information at their daily meeting, which informs the analysis of risk and subsequent action.

Decisions to undertake assessments are made quickly, and the manager's record of decisions includes clear actions and timescales for the social worker in the referral

and assessment team to complete. This is leading to a more consistent application of thresholds across the partnership, resulting in families receiving appropriate and more timely help and support. About 80% of referrals currently receive a management decision within 24 hours; while this figure has improved, senior managers are working hard to ensure that it improves further.

Strategy meetings are timely and the attendance and contribution by police have significantly improved following well-targeted challenge by senior leaders in Wandsworth. However, the contribution from health colleagues continues to be poor. While there is some variability in the quality of action plans from strategy meetings, most are purposeful and clear, containing specific targets and appropriate timescales. Outcomes are child-focused and reviewed effectively and ensure that child protection enquiries are timely and well co-ordinated.

Effective early support to families is beginning to reduce the need for a number of children to receive statutory interventions. As a result, the number of children subject to repeat referrals and repeat child in need or child protection plans is reducing. Senior managers meet regularly to ensure that the performance of the remodelled IPOC/MASH team is well monitored and that timely and appropriate transitions between early intervention, family support and statutory services are in place and that they provide families with proportionate help.

Case recording is not always up to date or sufficiently comprehensive. Information from partner agencies, although used to inform assessments, is not well recorded in case records and this does not enable social workers or managers to monitor the experiences of children effectively. Chronologies are not routinely completed and, when in place, are not used by social workers as an effective tool to inform assessments or planning for the child.

The views and day-to-day experiences of children are not well reflected at the assessment and planning stages. Case records to reflect the purpose, content and analysis of home visits to see children do not routinely capture this information. Senior leaders recognise that this continues to be an area for development.

While case records mostly record the child's ethnicity, this, and other issues of equality and diversity, are not routinely considered at the assessment and planning stages. Cultural elements of risk are not identified or explored with families, particularly in families where domestic abuse is a key feature.

The timeliness of assessments has improved from a low base, but senior leaders recognise that further improvement is required to meet the target that they have set. In recognition of this, senior leaders have created a fourth assessment team, to ensure that visits to see children following the initial referral, and subsequent assessments of children, are more timely and comprehensive. The quality of assessments is improving. However, the analysis of risk and protective factors is not always sufficiently comprehensive or robust.

Supervision of staff is regular in most cases and is becoming increasingly reflective. Recording of supervision in the IPOC/MASH team is strong and results in clearly defined action plans for social workers to follow. However, supervision in the assessment teams is not always well recorded and does not routinely identify weaknesses in practice or result in managers providing clear and concise case directions for social workers. When actions are set, these are not time bound and are not routinely tracked by managers to ensure that outcomes for children are improving. However, all staff who spoke to inspectors feel well supported and describe ease of access to their team manager as well as to assistant team managers and consultant social workers.

The local authority has continued to invest in staffing. However, there continues to be too many changes of social workers for children and this has resulted in plans for children not being progressed at sufficient speed. Senior managers recognise this and have strengthened and reviewed the workforce strategy. This continues to be a key focus for senior leaders. Staff retention is improving and a number of social workers have returned to Wandsworth, identifying the level of professional support and the breadth of services available to families as key incentives for their return.

Audit activity is now well embedded and lessons learned are disseminated to staff. However, audit activity is too focused on compliance and not sufficiently focused on the experiences of children. Improvement plans developed from cases audited that require improvement are not always well targeted or comprehensive and timescales for action are not clearly defined. 'Practice days' have been introduced to enable senior leaders to work with partner agencies to undertake audit activity, including observations of practice and to gather feedback from parents and children. Learning from these days is collated well and shared. It is used effectively to identify further learning and the need for practice improvement, both within social care and across the wider partnership.

Staff at all levels now have access to a suite of performance information and this is being used increasingly to identify areas for practice development and training delivery. A weekly performance meeting further strengthens the use of performance information and ensures that senior leaders are well informed of practice across the service and are able to respond effectively to fluctuating performance. Senior leaders recognise that further refinement is required in relation to the accuracy of the figures for early help assessments and this is currently being remedied.

Senior leaders have an accurate overview of key strengths and weaknesses across the service, and these are well understood and appropriately targeted. Outcomes for children are improving and children are beginning to benefit from social workers who have increasing capacity, knowledge and skills. There are wide-ranging training opportunities and staff are committed to improving their practice and incorporating lessons learned from audit activity, management feedback and practice days into their day-to-day practice. The key challenge for senior leaders is to further embed consistency of good practice across the service and to ensure that weaknesses in

supervision, case recording and the quality of assessments and plans are addressed swiftly.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website

Yours sincerely

Emmy Tomsett  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**