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Dear Martin

Monitoring visit to Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit of Dudley children's services on 2 and 3 May 2018. This was the sixth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged to be inadequate in April 2016. The visit was carried out by Alison Smale and Andy Waugh, Her Majesty's Inspectors.

The local authority has made positive progress in improving services for children and young people who receive early help services.

Areas covered by the visit

During this visit, inspectors reviewed the local authority's early help offer to children and families, including the threshold and decision-making applied for children stepping up to, and stepping down from, children's social care and early help services.

A range of evidence was considered during this visit, including visiting the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) as well as two of the five family centre hubs. Inspectors read electronic case records, supervision records and met with social workers, family support workers and team managers.

Overall

The quality of early help services has improved since the last inspection and more children are able to access them. This has prevented some children from requiring a statutory service and, as a result, more children are receiving a service which is commensurate with their levels of need.

Timely consideration of contacts and referrals in the MASH means that children's needs are identified promptly. Thresholds are applied appropriately. This ensures that children benefit from early help at the earliest opportunity or following a period of statutory intervention when their needs or risks have reduced. Dudley's early help offer includes services led by the local authority and a range of partners. Family centre hubs deliver early help services which include a local authority team made up of family support workers, a social worker and an enabler role. Their approach towards families is strength-based, recently consolidated through the relaunch of the early help strategy with revised practice standards.

Family support workers in the hubs know the children they work with well, they are enthusiastic and committed to providing positive outcomes for children. These improvements have resulted in stronger and more effective practice. This work is having a positive impact, improving the lives of an increasing number of children and families. The local authority recognises that more needs to be done to ensure consistent practice across all hubs and partners.

Evaluation and Progress

Children's needs are identified promptly through screening and information-sharing across partners in the MASH. Management oversight in the MASH is of a high quality and sets a clear direction for next steps. Early help referrals contain relevant and sufficiently detailed up-to-date information and are passed on without delay to the appropriate family centre for allocation. Communication is clear when a more immediate response is required.

There is a clear understanding and consistent application of thresholds through the early help service and the MASH. It is positive that children receiving statutory social work can also access family support worker assistance. This means that families experience continuity of workers when cases are stepped up to statutory services.

Daily domestic abuse referral triage meetings held in the MASH, provide an effective multi-agency forum to ensure that domestic abuse referrals for early help are dealt with promptly and effectively. A lead professional is identified without delay, to offer support to the child and their family. This ensures that an initial plan is in place quickly to support families, with a focus on the child, to prevent escalation of concerns.

The local authority is aware that multi-agency referrals that do not meet the threshold for statutory intervention are only recorded on the early help system and not on the children's social care recording system. Although manual checks are undertaken in the MASH, this could lead to gaps in available information. The local authority is aware of this and is in the process of procuring a new case recording

system which will be integrated across early help, children's and adult social care services.

Prior to allocation, an early help social worker contacts the family in response to the referral and begins to gather information and offer help. While this ensures that children and families receive help when they need it at the earliest opportunity, the assessment is not formally initiated until the case is allocated to a lead professional, which can be up to two weeks later. Cases continue to be monitored by qualified social workers prior to allocation to a lead professional. However, the local authority has agreed to amend its guidance by beginning the assessment with the family from the day the referral is received by the family centre hub.

Early help assessments do not routinely reflect the positive multi-agency engagement that takes place. Historical factors and patterns are not considered sufficiently, and chronologies are not used effectively. In a very small number of cases seen, this means that the focus is on the presenting needs without considering previous information and support. Early help staff benefit from a range of accessible training provided by the highly valued centre for professional practice. This input is having a positive impact on staff development and on improving practice such as completing assessments, working with families and undertaking parenting programmes. The recent introduction of a new assessment template and the support of social work consultations and guidance mean that the quality of more recent assessments and plans are improving, achieving sustainable progress for children.

Team around the child meetings are held regularly and involve those partner agencies most involved with the child and family. Assessments and plans are reviewed in these meetings and capture progress on updated plans. Early help staff respond to need and access a range of helpful services, which inspectors saw had a positive impact for children and families, for example addressing benefit and housing issues, improved home conditions, addressing child behaviour concerns and improving family relationships.

Most early help staff are tenacious in engaging with parents, including fathers. Many children benefit from direct work that skilfully captures and directly informs their assessments, ongoing plans and decision-making. However, this practice is not consistent, and some children's voices are absent, or communicated via an adult perspective or are not sufficiently reflected in assessments and plans. Caseloads in the early help service are allocated by family, with local authority guidance stating a maximum of 20 families. This means that some caseloads, particularly those with larger sibling groups, do not enable the worker to sufficiently focus on each child's individual needs.

The quality of supervision varies across the family support hubs. Some staff receive excellent supervision which offers an opportunity for reflection and learning, and progresses outcomes for children. However, some staff supervision lacks depth.

Inspectors found that better quality supervision resulted in improved progress with children and families.

Enablers are based in each hub and their work is building confidence among external partners to lead on early help work with families. Likewise, the introduction of the advanced practitioner and social workers to the teams is having a positive impact in strengthening practice through practice consultations, guidance and practical support. Each practice consultation is used at the next case supervision and this work is beginning to enhance the quality of supervision more generally.

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

Alison Smale
Her Majesty's Inspector