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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 7 and 8 August 2018. This was the seventh 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.

Areas covered by the visit

During this visit, inspectors reviewed the local authority's arrangements for children in need and children on child protection plans, including the effectiveness of management oversight and decision-making in this area.

A range of evidence was considered during the visit. This included visiting the assessment and care management teams. Inspectors read electronic case records, supervision records and met with social workers and team managers. Inspectors observed social work practice with children and families. Inspectors also scrutinised relevant local authority performance management and quality assurance information.

Overview

The local authority has made progress in improving services for children in need and those on child protection plans since the time of the last inspection. Inspectors did not see any children or young people at risk of significant harm. Leaders recognise that there is still more to do to sustain improvements in practice and to further develop consistent practice quality. High staff turnover presents challenges, which have started to have an adverse impact on workloads.

Evaluation and Progress

Leaders and senior managers know their service well. Clear strategic plans are in place to further improve services for children and families in Dudley. A new practice model is being phased in across children's social care. Although at an early stage of implementation, its positive impact can be seen in developments such as the effectiveness of family group conferences, which are increasingly being used to benefit children and families. Staff value the visibility and access to senior managers, such as through the weekly briefings organised by the chief officer. Senior managers are responsive to areas of potential risk. For example, when restructuring to create a whole-life disability service, line management of the children's disability team has been retained by children's services to ensure that the response to children continues to be effective.

Despite progress made, the local authority is experiencing competitive workforce pressures which could undermine the pace of progress and their ability to sustain improvements in social work practice. While senior managers are doing much to recruit and retain staff, caseloads in case management and assessment teams are too high. Further improvement is required in the management of staff turnover and caseloads. Some children experience delay in social workers progressing their plans, including delay in having their cases closed to statutory services.

Staff benefit from a comprehensive training offer, which they value. However, it inevitably takes time for newer staff to complete the range of training on offer. Managers and social workers speak positively about the management and development opportunities that are provided to help them to step up to management roles.

The local authority's audit programme has improved incrementally since the last inspection. Compliance and practice quality are routinely evaluated and addressed by a specific team known as the 'Centre for Professional Practice', which has developed proficiency in this area. Actions address identified deficits in children's cases and these lead to improvements in practice for children and families. The introduction of a moderation process is effective and enables challenge of the quality of audits. The local authority accepts that findings from audits are not yet fully recorded on children's case files or followed up systematically through supervision.

Management oversight is variable. Supervision is regular, and staff consistently told inspectors that they value support from their managers. Some managers are reflective and bring critical evaluation to their discussions with social workers. Others are not sufficiently professionally curious or challenging. Most supervision records contain actions that do not include sufficient detail or specify timescales. Decision-making is timely, but when actions are not followed up by staff, managers do not provide appropriate challenge. The content of supervision records tends to focus on

process and less on change and impact for children. This is a missed opportunity to improve practice and achieve more efficient working.

Too many children experience changes of social workers because of social workers' high caseloads. This impacts on social workers' ability to develop meaningful relationships with children and families. It also causes delays in recording in the assessment teams and increases caseload volume, because cases which could be closed remain open while waiting for recording to be completed.

Escalations of concerns by child protection chairs are increasingly well embedded and have increased significantly in the last year. A tracker is used proactively to monitor escalation progress. Outcomes for children have improved. For example, issues relating to advocacy and contact have been resolved through use of the escalation process, and delays in the progression of plans have been successfully challenged.

Thresholds are applied clearly and appropriately to inform decisions about step-up and step-down between children in need, child protection and early help services. Children's needs are responded to well as a result of plans that are reviewed regularly through child in need or core groups. Actions on child in need and child protection plans do not all include clear outcomes and timescales to ensure that families understand what is expected of both them and the professionals. Family group conferences, which use the new restorative practice model, are becoming well embedded for children in need and those on a child protection plan. Families are well prepared and are clear about what has been agreed in these meetings. Family group conference plans seen are effective, and are written in a way that ensures that families understand what they need to do to improve their children's lives.

Most children benefit from effective help, and this is enhanced through multi-agency planning and service provision. Agencies are actively involved in the vast majority of child in need and core group meetings. Progress is achieved, enabling better parenting for children, who also have their needs met. However, written child protection plans do not sufficiently capture the extent of the positive work undertaken by social workers with children and families. The recording system does not enable social workers to change or add more detail to outline child protection plans that have been agreed at child protection conferences. The local authority is investing in a new electronic recording system, but at present child protection plans are not sufficiently dynamic or able to be changed in the light of emerging issues and risks.

The adolescent response team offers intensive support to families, and this is addressing relationship and behavioural issues effectively. Positive examples were seen of the service reducing need and preventing children from becoming looked after. However, this is not seen through in performance information.

Neglect is recognised in most cases. Practice has improved for families in which there has been longer-term neglect. Social workers are more confident and tenacious,

meaning that they work more effectively with families, including fathers. Social workers achieve successful step-down when concerns have reduced and improvements have been sustained. Social workers who have been employed by the local authority for some time have been trained in the local authority's chosen model for assessing neglect and are using this to engage more effectively with children and their families.

Direct work with children is well embedded. Strong direct work with children informs many plans, but this is not consistent enough for all children. It is positive for children that a variety of methods are used to elicit their wishes and feelings and that social workers use these in ways that are right for each individual child.

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