

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231
Textphone 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/ofsted



31 August 2018

Melissa Caslake
Bi-Borough Executive Director of Children's Services
Westminster City Council
5, The Strand
London
WC2N 5HR

Dear Ms Caslake

Focused visit to Westminster children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Westminster local authority children's services on 7 and 8 August 2018. The inspectors were Andy Whippey, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Caroline Walsh, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Inspectors considered the local authority's arrangements for children who need help and protection, in accordance with the Inspections of Local Authority Children's Services framework. Specifically, inspectors looked at the 'front door' arrangements for the service that considers contacts and referrals, including decision-making within the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH), which provides a service to Hammersmith and Fulham, Kensington and Chelsea and Westminster children's services. They also considered transfers to and from early help services, the effectiveness of child protection enquiries and the quality of assessments and plans for children in need of help and protection.

Inspectors gathered evidence following case discussions with social workers and managers, and from meetings with partner agencies based in the MASH. They also reviewed the local authority performance management and quality assurance information, as well as the case records of children.

Overview

Within Westminster, there is strong corporate leadership to improve outcomes for children and their families who are in need of help or protection. Since the previous inspection of children's services in 2016, there has been a continued commitment to sustain and improve the quality of social work practice at the 'front door'. Senior leaders know the service well, as evidenced in their recent self-evaluation. This

knowledge is further informed by the use of relevant performance data. Inspectors found evidence of sound social work practice within the MASH, as well as in other social work teams. Social workers report that they are well supported. They know their children well and are confident and competent in their work.

Child protection concerns are quickly identified, leading to timely interventions to safeguard children and reduce risk. Assessments are mostly thorough, proportionate and incorporate the views of children and their families. The needs of children are clearly identified, and appropriate plans are put in place.

The local authority and its partner agencies have developed clear strategies to promote early intervention. This approach is well embedded and there is a wide range of services to support families when their need for additional support is identified.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The focus of case file audits on the impact of practice on outcomes for children and the clarity of actions required.
- Partner engagement in strategy discussions and meetings.

Findings

- Decision-making following contacts, including those out of hours, is appropriate and results in the timely progression of referrals for statutory services. This ensures that children and families receive the right help and support at the right time. Decisions to look after children in emergency circumstances are considered and appropriate. The rationale for decision-making is clearly recorded.
- Social workers ensure that they gain parental consent to make further enquiries in their initial consideration of referrals. There is a clear rationale for decisions to dispense with parental consent when there are overriding safeguarding concerns. Referrers are routinely contacted and informed of the outcome of their referral to children's services.
- When referrals are the subject of MASH enquiries, information sharing is prompt and of good quality, leading to effective risk analysis and appropriate decision-making. This is facilitated by the co-location of partner agencies in the MASH. Decisions are informed by a thorough consideration of family history to identify patterns and risk in order to safeguard children from further harm.
- Thresholds are appropriate and well embedded in practice. Immediate risk of significant harm is identified effectively, and responses are prompt and well-coordinated. Most strategy discussions are timely and thorough and lead to effective action to safeguard children, although some are held solely with the police and lack other partner agency information. Examples were seen by

inspectors of strategy discussions being held by the emergency duty team out of hours, that positively enhanced safety planning for children. In a minority of strategy discussions, there was a lack of clarity about actions to be pursued and the timescales for completion. Consideration of safety goals and the scaling of risk are contributing to clear analysis and decision-making. Inspectors saw examples of review strategy meetings in situations of complexity, where clarification of progress against actions and updating of multi-agency information enabled continued effective decision-making for children.

- Child protection investigations are timely and well written, and demonstrate child-centred, responsive work using a systemic approach to understanding children's circumstances and the underlying complexity of family dynamics. Outcomes are appropriate and well evidenced.
- The integrated gangs unit adds real value. Workers are tenacious in their efforts to engage young people. Positive work undertaken by the unit, including prevention, awareness raising and education, as well as specialist support to social workers, ensures that young people at risk are identified in a timely manner and receive good support.
- Early help referrals are proportionate to children's needs and there is a good range of early help support for families. The introduction of early help practitioners to the access and assessment service supports consistency of thresholds and positive interventions for children. Inspectors saw good use of brief interventions, ensuring timely responses to families and preventing escalation of concerns relating to children.
- In the vast majority of cases seen by inspectors, decisions to 'step down' to early help services were well evidenced, with clear next steps identified for ongoing support, and appropriate management oversight. When children's needs increase or risks escalate, the level and type of intervention required are reviewed effectively.
- Sensitive, creative and child-focused direct work undertaken by social workers means that children's wishes and feelings are understood, and this contributes to positive relationships that are successful at improving children's circumstances and reducing risk. Children are visited at a level consistent with their needs, and case recording in most cases includes good evidence of children's wishes and feelings. This contributes to effective planning.
- Assessments are mostly timely and proportionate, balancing and analysing risk and protective factors to underpin decision-making and future planning. They are informed by good observations of children and information gathered from a range of sources. Historic information is well considered. Social workers have a good understanding of children's identity and cultural needs.

- Plans change in accordance with needs and risk. They are reviewed appropriately, with good engagement of partners. The needs of children are very well articulated in plans, with desired outcomes explicit, although actions designed to meet needs do not always have associated timescales for action or implementation.
- Social workers who spoke to inspectors were very positive about working for Westminster, reporting regular, reflective supervision and good access to managers, including senior managers, who support them in their work. Inspectors saw examples of reflective supervision impacting positively on the work that social workers are undertaking with children and their families. While generally consistently good, in a small number of cases seen, supervision was insufficiently clear in providing case direction, particularly in terms of the timescales for actions to be completed.
- Staff morale in Westminster is high. Staff have good access to a wide range of induction and training opportunities. Staff development is prioritised to ensure that all practitioners have at least a basic understanding of systemic family therapy. Staff are assisted to gain qualifications as family therapists if they want to develop further. These opportunities, coupled with manageable caseloads, provide space for staff to reflect and focus on practice improvement.
- A wide range of performance data is used effectively to monitor and scrutinise 'front door' workflows, including the timeliness of decision-making, assessments and staff workloads. A quality assurance framework, including practice weeks, is well embedded. Practice week reports provide helpful comparisons with previous activities to show improvements or decline in performance and identify emerging themes and action plans. Staff value the opportunity to reflect on the findings.
- Audits seen by inspectors did not sufficiently evidence the lived experience of children or the impact of the work undertaken. In some audits, there was a lack of clarity as to the actions required, which is a missed opportunity to clarify what needs to be done to improve practice.

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

Yours sincerely

Andy Whippey
Her Majesty's Inspector