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Melissa Caslake
Bi-Borough Executive Director of Children's Services
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Dear Ms Caslake

Focused visit to Kensington and Chelsea local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Kensington and Chelsea local authority children's services on 7 and 8 August 2018. The inspectors were Karen Wareing, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Dawn Godfrey, 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

Highly experienced senior leaders and managers provide staff with a clear vision and focus to ensure that children and families receive good-quality services. Senior leaders know their services well. The recent self-evaluation demonstrates how they gain an understanding of social work practice from a range of sources, such as practice weeks, performance data and direct feedback from families.

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'. Inspectors found an effective 'front door' service within the locality teams which take referrals (initial contacts) and within the MASH. Cases are progressed in a timely manner, with thresholds well understood and applied effectively. Decision-making is appropriate and child protection concerns are dealt with swiftly in order to safeguard children. Well-engaged partners based in the MASH provide detailed information to assist decision-making.

The locality social work model is a strength, as children and families receive consistent social work support for as long as required. Children's services staff are trained as systemic practitioners. Specialist workers and family therapists based in all teams, manageable caseloads and a focus on practice development all contribute to a service which delivers purposeful work to children and families. Staff morale is high.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The involvement of partner agencies in strategy discussions.
- The consistency of recording of section 47 investigations.
- The clarity of action plans for children in need and following child protection conferences, with particular regard to each agency's accountability and timescales.

Findings

- Decision-making following contacts, including those out of hours, 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, most 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 risks in order to safeguard children from further harm.
- Strategy discussions do not fully involve all relevant partners. While information is routinely gained from health and other relevant professionals, the discussion is held only between the police and children's services. This limits the richness of discussion and decision-making, and limits other professionals' contributions to the ensuing action plans.
- Recording of section 47 investigations is variable. Some investigations that are recorded as part of a child protection conference report are thorough, with a clear recommendation and manager's authorisation. Other investigations are recorded as a list of enquiries made, and it is difficult to see any analysis, recommendation or manager's view.
- Social workers know their children and families well. The locality social work model ensures that children and families experience minimal changes of worker, even though their service needs may change. This means that children and families develop meaningful relationships with social workers, sometimes over many years. Social workers gain a thorough understanding of families' needs and circumstances, and team managers also develop a clear overview and insight into their teams' cases. As team managers know the cases well, they are aware of individual workers' pressures. They ensure that social workers' caseloads remain at a level where purposeful work can be carried out.
- Social workers and early help practitioners embrace the use of systemic practice with children and families. 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. All teams benefit from allocated specialist workers and family therapists, who offer support or co-work complex cases.
- Written assessments show detailed and clear recording, with strengths, risks and 'grey areas' well set out. Children's individual histories and circumstances are explored, and, in most cases, the voice of the child is clear. Inspectors saw evidence of direct work, including some very creative systemic practice, to assist children to understand their family circumstances. Assessments contain thorough analysis and clear recommendations about next steps. Therapeutic letters are very well written, demonstrating how relationship-based work underpins social work activities.

- Plans provide a general overview of the changes required to improve the circumstances of children and their families. In some cases, actions lack specificity, particularly regarding the role of professionals from partner agencies. Timescales are sometimes missing or simply set for the next review date. This means that professionals and families are not always clear about what needs to happen, what they need to do and by when in order to effect change.
- Early help thresholds are well understood and applied. Step-up and step-down decisions are appropriate, and it is positive that early help practitioners often continue working with families when statutory services are involved. Inspectors saw evidence of child-centred work where risks were well analysed, with good involvement from a range of professionals. The local authority is aware that it needs to develop its performance information to show up-to-date data, and outcomes of early help involvement.
- Senior managers gather and use performance information well. A rich source of information is gained from the twice-yearly practice weeks, which include case audits, discussions with social workers, observations of practice and direct feedback from families. Most of the audits seen by inspectors accurately reflected the work completed. Actions set by auditors are followed up in supervision, and wider learning for the organisation is gathered and shared. Practice week reports provide helpful comparisons with previous activities to show improvements or decline in performance, and to identify emerging themes and action plans. Staff value the time spent with auditors to reflect on the findings.
- Staff morale in Kensington and Chelsea is high. The workforce is stable, and staff enjoy the variety of in-depth work that they can carry out with families. Staff report a good level of supervision and support. Senior managers are visible and accessible and use feedback from social workers to develop services.
- Staff value the emphasis placed on their training and development. For staff who do not want to become managers, this provides another avenue for staff progression and is a valuable retention strategy. Training and co-training with other London boroughs are offered to ensure that staff are kept informed of local and national developments that impact on their work. Managers have established and maintain good links with partner agencies, and value the trust placed in them to manage their teams and resources.

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

Yours sincerely

Karen Wareing
Her Majesty's Inspector