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Dear Mr Thomas

Focused visit to Richmond Upon Thames local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Richmond Upon Thames local authority children's services on 9 and 10 April 2019. The inspectors were Marcie Taylor, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Anne Waterman, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children who need help and protection, in accordance with the Inspection 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 in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). Inspectors also looked at the routes into and out of early help services, and the quality and impact of assessments, plans and intervention in early help and with children in need.

Inspectors considered a range of evidence, which included case discussions with social workers and managers, and they met with representatives from partner agencies in the MASH. They also looked at children's case records, quality assurance information and the local authority's most recent performance management data.

Overview

Referral routes into the single point of access (SPA) and the MASH are well established and effective, as was the case when the local authority was last inspected in 2017. Effective multi-agency engagement and partners' contributions lead to timely and proportionate responses to the risks identified at the time of referral. When children's needs do not meet the threshold for statutory services, a range of options are considered, including referral to the family support service for an assessment of their needs. This leads to timely and effective help and support in most cases. The local authority's model of social work practice is fully embedded, and this is demonstrated in assessments and plans and, increasingly, in supervision. This enables practice to be consistent in quality and impact across the services and the locality 'clusters'.

Social workers are supported and supervised regularly and effectively so that plans progress in a timely way. In most cases, experienced managers provide and record a clear rationale for decisions in children's case records. Children are offered effective help from a wide range of early help services. Senior managers have already identified that early help assessments need to improve in the identification and analysis of presenting needs and risk, in order to inform support plans. When risks escalate or reduce, appropriate action is taken to ensure that children and families receive proportionate help and support. More work is needed to understand, evaluate and maximise the impact of this work on improving children's experiences and outcomes.

What needs to improve in this area of practice

- The identification of needs and the analysis of risk in early help assessments.
- The understanding and evaluation of the experiences of children and families, and the subsequent coordination and impact of early help and support in improving outcomes.

Findings

- Thresholds of need are clearly understood by staff and partner agencies and they are consistently applied. Professionals know how to access support through the SPA, and referrals for early help and children's social care are progressed quickly according to need.
- Professionals appropriately discuss known presenting risks at the daily MASH meeting and identify where further information is required. The co-location of professionals increases dialogue between partners and leads to timely multi-agency decisions. Police representatives in the MASH are working with their colleagues to improve the focus on children in police notifications.
- Child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) clinicians in the MASH review all referrals in relation to children's emotional well-being, ensuring that children with significant mental health needs receive a timely and appropriate response.
- When the threshold for statutory services is not met, referrals and assessments for family support are progressed quickly to identify children's needs. The relevant professional network from the locality forms a 'team around the child' within three geographical 'clusters'. Senior managers and partner agencies are undertaking a review of early help provision to clarify and strengthen multi-agency collaboration and contribution, and to enhance the role and extend the number of agencies becoming lead professionals for early help.
- Assessments for early help support identify needs appropriately. However, the identification and analysis of risk are not sufficiently prominent in the assessments to fully inform plans.
- There is a wide range of accessible, locality-based early help services available to children and families in Richmond. These include a family support 'coach', who provides direct work to increase the resilience and confidence of parents who have previously had children adopted, and separate groups for perpetrators and victims of domestic violence. Senior managers recognise that they need to improve the coordination of early help support to maximise resources and increase effectiveness, alongside developing a better understanding of children's experiences.

- When risks escalate or needs change, work is appropriately stepped up to children's social care. Assessments are comprehensive, underpinned by the local authority's social work model, and lead to clear, purposeful and measurable plans. This demonstrates improved practice since the last inspection in 2017. Plans are regularly and carefully reviewed by the multi-agency network and transferred to family support services if appropriate. Social workers attend handover meetings with family support workers to ensure that there is a clear plan for ongoing work.
- Family therapists, co-located with social workers, provide accessible and effective consultation and programmes of support to children and social workers. This service provides timely, direct therapeutic support to families, leading to a reduction in the number of children needing statutory intervention.
- Many different direct work tools are used effectively to capture children's views, and the findings are followed up with carers and professionals in visits and reviews. Work is sensitive and carefully considered, according to children's circumstances; this includes imaginative approaches to understanding the experiences of disabled children. As a result, social workers know their children well and take pride in children's achievements.
- The social work workforce is increasingly stable in Richmond. All workers who spoke to inspectors on this visit were on permanent contracts; this helps to provide continuity for children and families. Staff, including newly qualified workers in their assessed and supported year in employment (ASYE), highly value the support from managers. Supervision provides clear direction; it is regular and increasingly reflective. Regular group supervision provides an opportunity to discuss critical issues and informs direct work. Social workers access a wide range of training opportunities and can give examples of how they have applied knowledge to improve practice. The training helps workers to work meaningfully with the children on their caseload. Social workers report that caseloads are manageable.
- Senior managers have an accurate understanding of the strengths and areas for improvement for services at the 'front door'. There is a range of activities in place to assess the quality of practice, including regular performance reports, direct observations, regular feedback from children and families, and practice and thematic audits. Senior managers have recognised the need to develop audit tools to explicitly capture evidence of impact and improved outcomes for children.

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

Yours sincerely

Marcie Taylor
Her Majesty's Inspector