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Dear Niall

Focused visit to Hounslow local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Hounslow local authority children's services on 15 and 16 January 2020. The inspectors were Brenda McInerney, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Jan Edwards, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's service that considers contacts and referrals, including decision-making in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). They evaluated transfers between the MASH and 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 looked at a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers and managers, and they reviewed children's case records. They looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and action plans for improvement.

Overview

Since the last inspection in 2018, when overall effectiveness was judged to be good, but the experiences and progress of children in need of help and protection required improvement to be good, there have been several changes of senior leaders and other managers. These changes, combined with rising demand and challenges in recruiting social workers, have hampered work to address the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection.

Senior leaders have put in place a range of strategies, including increasing the proportion of permanent social workers and reducing the reliance on temporary staff. Many of these changes are too recent to have had a tangible impact. In

addition to this, there has been a decline in the timeliness of decision-making in response to initial contacts and in the timeliness of the completion of assessments. More consistent work with children at risk of significant harm is helping to keep children protected, and social workers are child-centred in their practice, but, overall, inspectors found that 'front door' services are not always timely or of a consistently good quality, particularly for children in need.

The chief executive and senior leaders acknowledge that limited progress has been made, and they are taking immediate and appropriate action to improve the quality of services for children and their families. A new and permanent director of children's services is about to take up his post, and, together with other new appointments, will be expected to accelerate the pace of improvement.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The timeliness of responses to referrals.
- The timeliness and quality of assessments of children in need.
- Partner engagement in strategy discussions.
- The quality and effectiveness of management oversight and supervision.
- The accuracy and effectiveness of performance data and case audits.

Findings

- The MASH has continued to develop since the previous inspection, with the addition of co-located probation, housing, early help and youth offending staff contributing to information-sharing and decision-making. The consistent use of risk assessment tools by social workers is supporting proportionate decision-making by managers.
- When presenting concerns do not meet the threshold for statutory services, the recently established early help hub within the MASH is helping families to access support. The co-location of the Home Office-funded 'children affected by domestic abuse' (CADA) project in the MASH is helping to connect children to timely therapeutic support. CADA staff link to local schools and build on the information-sharing within Operation Encompass, which is designed to ensure that all schools have timely information about all incidents of domestic abuse attended by police. These initiatives are too recent to have had a sustained impact on reducing the high level of demand at the 'front door'.
- Decision-making in response to new concerns about children is not always timely. At times, there are delays in MASH information-gathering to determine the next steps. When concerns about children's needs meet the threshold for social care, the duty arrangements in referral and assessment teams result in delays to some

children being seen and the start of their assessment. For a small number of children, this means that concerns remain unassessed for too long, while other children do not receive help at the earliest opportunity.

- Children at risk of significant harm receive a timely response. However, limited participation by health professionals in strategy meetings means that decisions about children at risk may not fully take account of their health and developmental needs. This was an area for improvement at the previous inspection.
- Child protection enquiries are thorough and they are informed by sensitive direct work with children; they result in immediate safety planning. The majority of child protection medicals are prompt, but there is insufficient liaison between social workers and the police to determine the action required when medicals confirm that children have been subject to physical abuse.
- In the last 12 months, there has been a significant decline in the time taken to complete social work assessments of children in need. This is due to a combination of high caseloads, staffing instability, social workers prioritising children at immediate risk of harm and a lack of robust management grip. In a small number of cases, there is a significant delay in concluding assessments and a resulting delay in the provision of help and support to children and families. Management oversight is not robust enough to ensure that such work is always progressed with urgency. Senior leaders are already implementing a range of appropriate actions to improve practice, including increased management scrutiny.
- The vast majority of assessments are comprehensive and informed by direct work that captures the lived experience and views of children. Social workers are tenacious in ensuring that the wider family, and fathers outside of the home, are included in assessments. However, in some cases, multi-agency information does not always inform assessments, and social workers report that they do not always receive health information from GPs.
- Decision-making at the completion of assessments and child protection enquiries is proportionate and is based on a clear social work analysis. The quality of the initial planning for children is improving, with timely initial multi-agency network meetings and conferences. Most plans have clear outcomes for children, although some lack specific actions and deadlines, as was the case at the previous inspection, making it harder to measure progress and change.
- The recently formed adolescent team is developing interventions for young people when there are complex safeguarding risks. Interventions are starting to show some impact on engaging some young people, although joint work with other specialist teams and roles is still in development.

- Since the last inspection, the offer of support, accommodation and care to young people aged 16 and 17 years who present as homeless has improved. Plans are also in place to develop the service further, including the appointment of a dedicated officer within the housing department, to ensure a consistently well-coordinated assessment of young people's care and housing needs.
- The majority of decisions to 'step down' families to early help services are appropriate. However, the management and tracking of panel decisions to transfer families from social work teams to early help is not sufficiently robust. In some cases, risk assessments for children are incomplete or families do not engage with the new service. When children's needs increase or risks escalate, practitioners within the early help service make timely referrals to the MASH.
- An interim designated officer is providing effective management of allegations against professionals, and their work with the youth secure estate is a strength.
- Social workers told inspectors that they feel well supported by their line managers and have regular supervision and access to training. Some social workers in the referral and assessment teams have caseloads which are too high, and, as a result, they are not able to keep children's records up to date or complete less urgent casework within timescales. Some social workers are holding complex caseloads which are not always commensurate with their level of experience. Despite these pressures, social workers in Hounslow are very motivated and they are working hard to get the best outcomes for children.
- Leaders and managers at all levels do not have a wholly accurate overview of performance and the quality of practice. The recently developed Performance and Learning Board is having some success in securing improvement, such as with the timeliness of child protection responses. Unreliable performance data and case file audits that do not identify areas of weaker practice are hampering the Board's impact. Senior leaders already have plans in place for improvement.

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

Yours sincerely

Brenda McInerney
Her Majesty's Inspector