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Dear Ms Dutton

Focused visit to Wigan children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Wigan children's services on 3 and 4 May 2023. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Teresa Godfrey and Kathryn Grindrod.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for the 'front door'.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. Inspectors were on site during this visit. They spoke with social workers, managers and leaders. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.

Headline findings

Since the previous inspection, in May 2022, when the overall effectiveness of the service was judged to require improvement to be good, senior leaders have identified appropriate priority areas for improvement in children's services. This has ensured that there is a more effective and coordinated multi-agency response at the front door than was previously the case. Systems and processes have been strengthened and risk of harm is recognised promptly, which ensures that the majority of children receive an appropriate level of support at the right time.

There is continued strong corporate and political support for children's services in Wigan, including substantial financial investment. This has enabled senior leaders to respond proactively and creatively to workforce challenges, such as increasing the number of managers and social workers at the front door, which is having a positive impact on practice. The introduction of a new early help development team means that children and families in Wigan are now receiving earlier help and support to meet a range of complex needs.

The use of managed teams, and a reliance on agency staff across the service, has reduced over the last 12 months as progress has been made to recruit permanent social workers. The additional capacity and stability in the workforce have led to reduced caseloads and improved relationships with children and families. There is a continued focus on quality assurance activity, with regular audits of practice carried out with practitioners, to embed learning into practice.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice?

- The consistency of quality and the robustness of management oversight and effective screening in the hub.
- The recording of the rationale for decision-making concerning parental consent.

Main findings

Children in need of help and protection are identified in a timely way in the children first partnership hub. Although levels of demand are high at the front door, additional levels of management oversight and social work capacity have supported timely decision-making and contributed to workforce resilience. Safeguarding and early help contacts are received through the recently implemented web portal, which has been well-received by partner agencies and ensures that contacts can be tracked more efficiently.

Managers provide appropriate oversight and direction following the receipt of a contact into the hub. Contacts are assigned a priority level for screening, which is proportionate to the presenting level of need or risk. Social workers apply their professional judgement effectively to carry out checks and actions in response to the presenting concerns. Children's histories are well-considered and previous partner agency involvement is routinely recorded as part of the screening process. For most children, this clearly informs social work analysis and management decision-making about next steps. For a small number of children, screening is not as thorough as it should be and decisions are made without a full understanding of their individual circumstances. Managers do not always challenge this sufficiently.

There is appropriate representation from partner agencies co-located in the hub, including police, health, 'start well' early help teams and education. Information-sharing between agencies is effective and contributes to timely and proportionate decision-making.

The introduction of a consultation line and increased partner representation in the hub is planned in order to further strengthen the response to risk and support for children in need of help and protection in Wigan.

Feedback is routinely provided to referrers. Parental consent for information-sharing is usually sought and obtained. However, when parental consent is dispensed with, the management rationale for this is not always clear.

Thresholds are mostly applied appropriately in the hub and assessment teams. At the end of the screening process, social workers make recommendations to ensure that the next steps best meet the child's level of need. Management oversight of these recommendations is usually well recorded, with a clear and timely rationale. This helps social workers to prioritise their work and respond promptly to support children with a range of complex needs and vulnerabilities.

Children are stepped down to early help support quickly from the hub. The newly established early help development service works with partners to assist and advise them in their early help work with families. A weekly drop-in session supports schools and partners with advice and consultation, and this has raised partners' understanding of thresholds. Since the last inspection, there has been an increase in the number of early help assessments completed by partner agencies, which is a positive development. Early help assessments are thorough and detailed and inform subsequent plans, which have clear targets and timescales and are regularly reviewed. Creative, child-focused work is undertaken by the 'start well' service, and this has a positive impact on children's experiences and outcomes.

Children are promptly allocated a social worker from one of the specialist assessment teams when the threshold for a statutory assessment of children's needs is met. Most assessments are thorough and include consideration of past family history and harm, current strengths, and areas of risk. Social workers undertake thoughtful, child-centred work with children and families and make appropriate referrals to specialist teams during the assessment period. This allows support work to start quickly and helps to prevent risks escalating.

When children are at risk of significant harm, responses to immediate safeguarding concerns are timely and proportionate. Strategy meetings are held promptly and are appropriately attended by partner agencies. Important multi-agency information is shared and risks are identified, which leads to children being seen promptly to inform an assessment of risk. This area of practice has improved since the last inspection due to partners working effectively together to address issues of process and capacity at the front door.

When it is appropriate to escalate concerns to both single and joint section 47 enquiries, child protection investigations are thorough and clearly capture children's views and experiences through the use of direct-work tools. Outcomes following a section 47 enquiry are appropriate, and clearly detail the rationale for next steps, carefully considering how to manage and support vulnerable families.

There continues to be an effective, well-established and child-focused out-of-hours service in Wigan. Experienced children's social workers operate on a duty rota to ensure that urgent issues are responded to quickly and families are visited when required. There is an effective interface with daytime services, which leads to timely and proportionate responses to keep children protected.

Staff in the specialist assessment and early help teams benefit from regular supervision. Supervision is clearly recorded and usually identifies risks to children and confirms tasks to be completed. For a small number of staff, supervision could be strengthened with a greater degree of reflection about children's experiences, such as the impact of domestic abuse on their emotional development.

A wide range of audit and quality assurance activity provides senior leaders with an accurate understanding of the quality of frontline practice. The learning from audits, reviews of practice, performance data and feedback from families is routinely used to plan targeted audit activity so that practice can be improved. A review of management oversight and response to referrals at the front door was recently undertaken by the independent scrutineer of the local safeguarding partnership. A programme of regular thematic multi-agency audits further strengthens quality assurance activity across the partnership.

'Practice priorities' have been introduced in response to learning from audits. Focused workshops have taken place with staff to embed these priorities and to disseminate learning from case reviews. This area of practice has improved since the last inspection, although senior leaders acknowledge that there is more to do to ensure that the focus on quality and impact for children continues to translate into more consistently effective social work practice.

Staff were unanimously positive when speaking with inspectors about working in Wigan. Although they report feeling busy, they state that they are well-supported by managers and leaders at every level. Workloads appear to be manageable at the front door. Social workers said that they feel valued and listened to and told inspectors that senior managers collaborate with them to find better ways to improve outcomes for children.

Senior leaders remain focused on the continued recruitment and retention of staff, and the creation of supportive, stable teams where social work can flourish. There has been investment in an additional academy team in the specialist assessment service to support children with a child in need plan. An ambitious recruitment strategy aims to continue to increase the permanent establishment, to ensure that services to children and families in Wigan are provided by skilled, committed and child-focused social workers.

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

Yours sincerely

Teresa Godfrey
His Majesty's Inspector