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Dear Ian

Focused visit to Medway local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Medway local authority children's services on 5 February 2019. The inspectors were Maire Atherton, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Dominic Stevens, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Inspectors reviewed the local authority's arrangements for responding to contacts and referrals at their 'front door', the First Response Team. This team comprises the single point of access (SPA) and the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). Inspectors considered the quality of assessments, the effectiveness of strategy meetings and child protection enquiries, and thresholds for the transfer of work to early help services. Inspectors also reviewed the management of allegations against professionals and carers.

Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, case discussions with social workers, managers and partner agencies based within the MASH, and early help practitioners in one of the children and family hubs. They reviewed the local authority's performance and quality assurance information, relevant to the area of focus for this visit.

Overview

The leadership team has secured marked improvements in the local authority's response to contacts and referrals since the joint targeted area inspection in June 2018. Processes to support social work practice, new at the time of the previous visit, have been embedded and strengthened. In most cases, children and their families now receive a timely and proportionate response to their needs. The

progress that has been achieved has been sustained, despite a significant increase in the number of contacts and referrals.

Multi-agency working and information-sharing in the MASH are increasingly effective. Although access to a wide range of health information has recently improved, health partners' participation in and contribution to strategy meetings continue to be weak. Inspectors noted progress in the overall engagement of the police, but there remain some delays in domestic abuse notifications being sent to the SPA by the police, attributed to the introduction of a new information technology system.

Senior leaders know the service well. They acknowledge the strengths in the service, but are realistic about where further improvement is needed, for example in the quality of assessments. Suitable plans are in place to address these weaknesses. Leaders and managers use performance information and the findings from quality assurance activities to target resources and deliver training in a timely way. Overall, this approach is proving to be effective in securing positive changes in practice. Staff describe experiencing high support and high expectations within a learning culture. They are positive about working for Medway. The visibility and approachability of senior managers and their engagement with staff promote a whole-team approach that is supporting further progress.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The participation of health partners in strategy meetings, to ensure that timely and full information is provided to facilitate the comprehensive consideration of risks to children.
- The timeliness of contacts and referrals that are sent by the police to the MASH.
- The quality of assessments, and the timeliness of initial visits to children and their families.

Findings

- Decisions about contacts and referrals to the SPA, including those that are received out of hours, are made in good time. Initial threshold decisions are proportionate and take account of relevant multi-agency information. Suitable consent is obtained.
- Inspectors identified delays of between four days, and, in one case, four weeks, in the sharing by police of domestic abuse and relevant crime notifications. Although no children were found to have suffered further harm as a result, these delays potentially leave children in situations of unassessed risk.
- In the cases sampled, managers in the SPA had provided clear direction and oversight in a timely way, with a focus on the needs of the children. In a minority

of cases, the record of the next steps that were being recommended was not comprehensive enough.

- There has been a welcome increase in the range of multi-agency professionals who are based in, or linked to, the MASH. This includes the recent appointments of an education lead, a domestic abuse officer and a missing and exploitation coordinator. MASH outcome meetings, held twice daily, are effective and facilitate good information-sharing and discussion. This encourages appropriate challenge and professional curiosity, informing timely decision-making and recommendations that are matched well to risk and need.
- When children are at immediate risk of significant harm, this is quickly recognised, and referrals are progressed to child protection strategy meetings and assessment teams, so that protective action can be taken. Strategy meetings, although not always informed by the presence of, or full information from, all relevant agencies, are held promptly and lead to appropriate decisions about threshold and next steps. The full-time deployment of a police sergeant in the MASH to participate in strategy discussions has been positive.
- At the time of the visit, a process for enabling the MASH health professional to access a wide range of health information had very recently been implemented, supported by a new information-sharing protocol. A substantial challenge remains in ensuring that health agencies participate in, and contribute meaningfully to, strategy meetings and assessments.
- Although there has been a recent improvement in the timeliness of assessments, there is considerable variability in their quality. Some make good use of research, history and multi-agency information to inform analysis, recommendations and decisions. Direct work with children is increasingly used well to provide a sense of children's lives in the recording of home visits and in assessments. However, some assessments lack rigour and do not provide a consistent consideration of history and children's experiences. Some do not evidence that the tasks identified in initial management guidance, such as completion of chronologies and agency checks, have been completed. In these cases, the information that is needed to conclude the assessment or to inform next steps is incomplete or delayed. The use of evidence-based tools, such as the graded care profile and specific risk assessments, is not well embedded within the assessment teams.
- The local authority is taking well-focused action to address the areas it has highlighted for development in the assessment teams. This includes the recent appointment of three permanent practice managers. A key challenge to the pace of progress is the continuing high caseloads in these teams. Although efforts to improve staffing levels to address this are appropriate, the impact of high caseloads is that some initial visits to children are delayed.
- The formation of children and family hubs has provided a sound base for the provision of early help services in Medway. There is a firm commitment to the

provision of services tailored to children and their families, and the local authority and partners in the statutory and voluntary sector are working well together to achieve this. Thresholds for cases moving between early help and statutory services were well understood and appropriate in cases seen by inspectors.

- The designated officer service, responding to concerns about adults in positions of trust, is now fully staffed, and the quality and timeliness of work is progressing. The service has responded effectively to learning from a recent serious case review linked to the Medway secure training centre. Systems for overseeing the progression and quality of the work in the designated officer team are robust.
- The local authority has worked hard to recruit and retain permanent staff and managers, and this is an improving picture. At the time of this visit, 75% of staff were in permanent positions. Vacant posts were filled with agency staff. Despite high service demand and high caseloads, social workers are positive and optimistic. Staff talk about good levels of support, both formal and informal. Group supervision with external facilitators is valued, and staff describe how they have put learning from this approach into practice. Management oversight and direction, which makes use of case audit outcomes, is increasingly effective.

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

Yours sincerely

Maire Atherton
Her Majesty's Inspector