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Dear Tim

Focused visit to Birmingham Children's Services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Birmingham children's services on 19 and 20 February 2020. The inspectors were John Roughton, HMI, and Andy Waugh, HMI.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for contacts and referrals in the Children's Advice and Support Service (CASS) and the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH). Inspectors reviewed the threshold application for children in need and child protection, arrangements for children and families stepping down to early help and to the Assessment and Short Term Intervention Service (ASTI) for social work assessment, carried out on behalf of the council by Birmingham Children's Trust.

Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers and children's case records. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information.

Overview

There has been continued progress and improvement in the front door arrangements since the December 2018 inspection, particularly in respect of threshold application, management oversight and decision-making. This is positive for children and families in Birmingham, who receive an appropriate response to initial identified needs and concerns. Quality assurance and performance information arrangements have been strengthened. Leaders have a good understanding of their strengths and areas for improvement. The trust is aware of the continuing need for partner agencies to strengthen the quality of referral to the CASS. Further work is also needed to ensure

that partners complete more early help assessments and interventions so that children and families get the right help early enough to prevent harm.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The consistent timeliness of the professional screening of new contacts and referrals, including out of hours arrangements for this.
- The completion and quality of safety planning.
- The pace of development of the multi-agency early help offer.
- Improved access in CASS to information held by schools.

Findings

- The quality of contacts and referrals from partner agencies remain inconsistent, and consent is not routinely obtained by the referring agency. However, social workers in CASS seek to obtain consent in all cases, even where consent has been recorded.
- When contacts are made over the weekend, they are not always screened by the out-of-hours service, meaning that children's circumstances may not be responded to quickly enough. The trust is aware of this, and has well-developed plans in place to improve the seamlessness of out-of-hours services.
- Once new contacts and referrals are taken, there are sometimes delays in the initial professional screening. This means that the circumstances of some children and families are not considered soon enough when there may be immediate needs or safeguarding concerns. However, no children were seen to be left in situations of risk or harm. During the visit, senior leaders established enhanced arrangements and monitoring systems, with the aim of ensuring earlier management screening at the point of contact.
- Once children and families are screened, work is promptly allocated to relevant CASS workers for further information-gathering from case files and agency checks. Social workers routinely record their rationale and recommendation for next steps, with effective use of the threshold document and practice methodology to inform them. In most cases, thresholds are applied correctly.
- When undertaking agency checks in the MASH, a centralised-request-for-information system is in place to enhance the ease and timeliness of information-sharing for police and health partners. Education services do not offer this resource, which means that information from schools about

children's progress and well-being is not always promptly available to inform decision-making on next steps.

- Management oversight in CASS is clear and effective. Managers provide clear directions, and give the rationale for decisions that are recorded or endorsed. Work moves on swiftly from CASS to other relevant service areas.
- Since the last inspection, more early help assessments are being carried out by partner agencies. This has been aided by the trust's appointment of additional family support workers to assist schools and other agencies to engage better with early help. Effective quality assurance arrangements help improve the quality of assessments and lead to improved earlier outcomes for children. This is reflected in the reduction of re-referrals into the trust. However, there remains an overreliance on the trust, by universal health and education providers, to provide much of the early help response. Family support staff are still completing more than 60% of all early help assessments in Birmingham. This is impacting on their capacity to support children and families at the higher statutory threshold, where they should be targeted. A proposal for investment in multi-disciplinary early help, properly integrated with trust services, is in development, which is both necessary and appropriate. Swifter pace is needed to implement this more effective service model for early help across the city.
- Strategy meetings consistently involve appropriate partner agencies and, in most cases, are held promptly. Information provided to strategy meetings appropriately reflects the risks to children. Actions are clearly recorded and focus on immediate protection, as well as considering wider issues, such as referral to the designated officer. However, once immediate protection is assured, there is an inconsistent approach to safety planning for children. Parties are not clear about mutual expectations if heightened risks emerge. The trust is aware of this and has planned audit and review arrangements to improve this area of practice.
- Contacts relating to domestic abuse, triaged by MASH police, result in detailed information, clear recommendations and priority actions. High volumes of referrals are received daily. Triage does successfully and appropriately filter out approximately half of the domestic abuse referrals to MASH, enabling MASH workers to focus on those cases that present a greater risk and require further assessment.
- The contextual safeguarding and missing hub is a strong and effective addition to front door services. This recent development covers all aspects of child exploitation. The daily triage meeting has clear processes in place for young people to be referred to and discussed in the hub. Multi-agency discussions from a wide range of partners use live information to enable staff to formulate plans, request complex strategy meetings and provide guidance

for social workers. Young people who are being exploited now receive a service from a passionate and committed group of professionals, who work directly with them to increase their safety.

- The ASTI service promptly allocates work received from CASS. Most cases have a management direction to guide social workers in the progression of the assessment. Most children are visited within three days of allocation. Where s47 investigations are agreed at a strategy meeting, children are visited on the same day. Social workers' recording of children's views is consistently of a high standard.
- Since the last inspection, a new case recording system has been successfully implemented. Initial problems have been well managed and staff are growing in confidence in their use of the system. Staff note that senior leaders listen to them and respond quickly when problems emerge.
- The associated live performance management system has also been recently implemented. This is beginning to be used by managers to support their day-to-day management and prioritisation of work. Quality assurance arrangements have strengthened through the development of the practice hub. Learning from audits is routinely shared with staff, supporting practice improvement. The trust is aware of further work required to strengthen the audit process and this work is underway, led by the practice hub.
- Staff morale in the CASS, MASH and ASTI services is very good. All staff spoken to are positive about working for the trust and the progress made since its inception. Staff report receiving consistently good support from all tiers of highly visible leaders and managers, which is positively impacting on recruitment and retention rates. This means that children and families are experiencing fewer changes of workers and are thus able to build more trusting relationships.

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

Yours sincerely,

John Roughton

Her Majesty's Inspector