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29 March 2019

Gladys Rhodes-White
Interim Strategic Director
Department of Children's Services
City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council,
1st Floor, Margaret McMillan Tower, Princes Way
Bradford
BD1 1NN

Dear Gladys,

Monitoring visit of Bradford children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Bradford children's services on 06 March 2019. The visit was the first monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in September 2018. The inspectors were Jan Edwards, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Alison Smale Her Majesty's Inspector.

The local authority is starting to make positive progress from a very low base in improving the services and response that children and families receive when requests for services are first made.

Areas covered by the visit

During this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in relation to the front door – the service that receives contacts and referrals, as well as the effectiveness of the manager oversight of the service, and the response to young people age 16-17 years old when they present as homeless.

The visit considered a range of evidence, including; electronic case records, observation of contact advisors, the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) social workers, performance management information, case file audits and other information provided by senior managers. In addition, inspectors spoke to a range of staff including social workers, managers and other practitioners.

This report of the Monitoring Visit on the 6th and 7th March 2019 contains confidential information as defined by section 100A of the Local Government Act 1972 – Government restriction. The letter was given to the Local Authority by Ofsted upon terms which forbid the disclosure of the letter to the public until after 29 March 2019.

Overview

The local authority has started to make positive progress, from a low base, in improving its front door services. There is a more proportionate screening of contacts made to children's social care. Consent is generally better understood and managed although there remains variability in its application. Staff are embracing a new way of working as opposed to what has been done traditionally.

The interim Strategic Director and her leadership team have swiftly reached a good understanding of the scale and depth of inadequacies in services for children and young people. In the three months since the Strategic Director has been in post a MASH Strategic Board has been established to oversee and drive the improvement plan of the front door. This has very recently demonstrated improvements in some key areas of activity at the front door. The wider improvement plan addresses the areas of improvement identified at the last inspection, although would benefit from a greater focus on outcomes for children and young people.

Young people age 16-17 years-old who present to the council for help and support because they are homeless do not receive a good service. The service response has not ensured the improvements identified at the last inspection and has not met the council's own ambitions for these young people.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Inspectors identified some practice areas that have made clear progress and other areas where improvements need further embedding.

The Children's Initial Contact Point (CICP) is the first point of contact for all requests for a service. Contacts are screened promptly. The placement of a social worker in the CICP has strengthened the initial screening function and the earlier consideration of appropriate consent for a referral.

The majority of cases sampled in the MASH, demonstrate that thresholds for an early help or social care service are being applied appropriately. While there has been considerable improvement to the level of screening undertaken, so that this is now proportionate to the level of risk and need, decision making on some contacts continue to go out of the expected timescale for screening.

The early help gateway has been co-located to the MASH and the process of a full integration with the service has been initiated. While this has yet to be achieved, staff report that they can already see the benefits of co-location in improved communication and manager oversight and that work is held at the right level. For example, cases of neglect and referrals made by anonymous persons, which had been dealt with by early help at the time of the previous inspection, are now appropriately screened by the MASH.

Early help triage is supported by an effective use of a chosen risk assessment methodology to determine the right service to meet the needs of the child and family. Contacts are appropriately sent to social care to be screened by the MASH when they are considered to require a social work service.

When concerns or risks are heightened appropriate decisions are made to escalate for a social work assessment or a strategy meeting to consider whether child protection enquiries are required. Strategy meetings in the MASH are well attended with the required minimum of professionals necessary which promotes appropriate decision-making. There are some delays in the completion of child protection enquiries due to basic checks and seeking of consent, even when, this could have been dispensed with. The rationale for decision making is not always clearly recorded and is not always based on a sufficiently detailed outcome assessment.

Interpreters are appropriately used for parents whose first language is not English, but this is not consistently the case for children, and in-particular for very young verbal children. Inspectors found that children are seen and spoken to during child protection enquiries. There is little observation or analysis of their presentation, and their views are limited to their current circumstances rather than being used as an opportunity to ascertain their wider lived experience. There is no evidence of social workers using direct work tools to aid communication. This means that senior leader's ambition to improve the voice of the child has not yet been realised in the early stages of the child protection process.

Safety planning agreed at strategy meetings identify basic protective actions. However, there is an over-emphasis on the parent to safeguard. This represents a missed opportunity to consider the role of other professionals and the families wider support networks to develop comprehensive safety plans.

The Strategic Director is uncompromising in challenging practice within social care and across the partnership when it falls below expected standards or where practice has not been compliant with the principles of Working Together, 2018. This has resulted in social work managers having more confidence to reassert their lead role in child protection processes and in decision-making. Police partners in the MASH report that it has been the strength of the relationships in the multi-agency hub which has enabled them, after an initial problematic start, to embrace the cultural changes required to support the improvement plan.

Domestic abuse contacts are considered by experienced and knowledgeable social workers which allows for insightful and sensitive handling of referrals where domestic abuse features. There is a timely response to domestic abuse incidents supported through a daily risk assessment meeting to consider high risk cases.

The response to young people who present as homeless is not good enough. There are delays in assessing the needs of these young people and their right to become looked after is not explained or explored with them. The temporary accommodation arrangements offered are short term and not suitable, such as the use of bed and

breakfast and adult hostels. This leads to further exposure to risk for these vulnerable young people.

Improved data is providing the right type of information to be able to monitor service effectiveness and provide the basis for driving the improvements and forward planning. There is more to do to make performance information more intuitive to enable live data collection and assist managers in their daily management of the service.

Senior leaders understand the importance of having a robust programme of quality assurance. This is demonstrated through a broad programme of auditing and dip sampling activity of the front door since the last judgement inspection. There is more to do in developing the skill base of auditors and auditing practice. Leaders recognise that auditing is more meaningful for learning and in understanding quality when done in conjunction with social workers and there is an intention to develop this. The regular use of moderation is good practice and provides additional checks and balances whilst consistency of approach is achieved.

The extensive auditing programme of the front door has enabled the service to track the progress of developments in social work practice, clearly identifying in December 2018 that the improvement plan had not yet brought about the necessary change to ensure children were safe. By February 2018, audits had identified that progress was now being made. Senior managers under the leadership of the Strategic Director understand the service well and are clear about what is still required to improve the quality and consistency of practice.

Council leaders are fully committed to supporting the necessary changes so that children of Bradford receive good quality services. There has been a significant financial investment, facilitating an uplift in social work salaries, retention payments, and an increase in the social work establishment. Social workers are being supported in their learning and development through a necessary 'Bradford Basics' programme and are fully engaged with and enthusiastic about the change programme following the judgement inspection.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Jan Edwards

Her Majesty's Inspector

The letter is copied to the Department for Education [at SocialCare.INSPECTION-IMPROVEMENT@education.gsi.gov.uk]

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