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13 March 2017

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Dear Ian

Monitoring visit of Rotherham Borough Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Rotherham children's services on 9 and 10 February 2017. The visit was the second monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in October 2014. The inspectors were Her Majesty's Inspectors Tracey Metcalfe and Jansy Kelly. Social Care Regulatory Inspector Pauline Yates shadowed the visit.

Inspectors have also undertaken four improvement visits between 2015 and 2016 to monitor the local authority's progress.

Overview

The local authority is making continuous progress in improving services for children in need of help and protection. The implementation of multi-disciplinary locality teams is leading to improved coordination of early help support to families by the local authority. The quality of early help assessments is slowly but steadily improving and they are leading to a direct offer of help which is highly valued by families. However, the number of early help assessments being completed by multi-agency partners remains too low. The robust screening of contacts to children's social care, supported by effective multi-agency information sharing, is leading to more timely assessments of need and risk. While assessment quality is beginning to improve with evidence of some good work emerging, assessments and section 47 investigations are not focused well enough on risk or children's holistic needs. This has an impact on the quality of children's plans and the interventions that they receive. Progress can be seen in the quality of management oversight and performance management. Workforce planning is highly effective. Recruitment and retention rates are better than the national average. Due to a positive organisational culture staff are highly committed and motivated and they report feeling valued.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the areas of access to early help services and whether children in need of help and protection are identified by professionals and receive timely help that is proportionate to risk and their levels of need. Inspectors focused particularly on:

- The quality and coordination of the early help offer
- The effectiveness of contact, referral and assessment services
- The quality of children's assessments and whether they lead to appropriate and timely offers of help
- The quality of section 47 enquiries and investigations
- The impact of leaders and managers.

The visit considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, supervision files and notes, observation of social workers and senior practitioners undertaking referral and assessment duties and other information provided by staff and managers. In addition, we spoke to a range of staff, including managers, social workers, other practitioners and administrative staff.

Findings and evaluation of progress

The implementation of multi-disciplinary locality teams is leading to improved quality and coordination of early help support to families. Early help assessments (EHAs) are being undertaken more efficiently, and these are leading to a direct offer of help for individual children and their families. There is much evidence of children's circumstances improving as a result of the early help being provided. There are also some positive examples of very timely intervention and support for families who have an allocated worker within one of the locality teams. The local authority's use of exit interviews endorses this positive work, and it is clear that the service offered through early help is valued highly by families.

Staff within the locality teams are working well together. This follows a period of team development that included activities to help them to learn about each other's range of skills and ways in which they could network to provide enhanced support to children and their families. All workers who spoke with inspectors feel that they have been appropriately trained to undertake EHAs and team around the family (TAF) meetings. Most workers have also participated in a variety of other training to enhance their work with children and families. This training has covered restorative practice and child sexual exploitation, although not all workers have received training on how to use the child sexual exploitation screening tool.

Much progress has been made towards securing reliable performance management information, which is commendable given the number of systems currently reporting on early help. Further work is required to refine this performance data, including improved analysis and explanation of the data to make it more accessible. Inclusion

of the frequency of the review of early help plans via TAF meetings would assist managers in monitoring this element of the early help provision.

The completion of EHA assessments within the locality teams is, in the majority of cases, timely. The quality remains variable, and all EHAs seen during this visit have a number of areas in which they could be improved. In most cases, the child's lived experience is not fully explored or understood, and EHAs lack evidence that the worker has considered significant issues in sufficient detail to lead to full understanding of the impact of these on the child. All EHAs would be improved through including a stronger analysis of issues and needs to inform the development of support plans.

All EHAs seen included the child's voice, and there was evidence on the file of direct work to understand the child's wishes and feelings. The quality of this work is variable, and the majority of EHAs require further analysis after direct work sessions in order to gain further insight into the child's life. Workers routinely seek to involve parents, including fathers and stepfathers, in their work. When this is not successful, they show persistence in building relationships with these important adults in order to inform their work with the child.

The local authority has improved in many areas of early help provision to children and their families, including outlining clear expectations to partners regarding their role in the assessment and provision of early help. However engagement by operational colleagues from other agencies remains extremely low. Although performance is very slowly improving in this area, there are too few other agencies undertaking EHAs and taking on the lead professional role to ensure the early help model can become embedded and sustainable. In many cases, partner agencies are engaged with TAF plans and meetings, but in some cases key agencies are not attending the meetings. The local authorities' current expectations of partners to undertake this work also appears low within the operational triage and the step-down panel meetings. There is no standard offer of support for partners undertaking their first EHAs or a process to ensure the quality of these assessments.

The co-location of multi-agency professionals at the front door has strengthened partnership relationships, improving understanding of how other professionals work. This has helped to break down previous communication barriers. There is now a much greater understanding and application of the threshold for access to children's social care. Contacts are robustly screened by social workers and signed off by managers. The added value of early help professionals sitting alongside social workers ensures that the type of response required is swiftly agreed and is informed by effective information sharing and analysis. Consequently, children and families are offered timely, holistic assessment and support planning to address needs as they emerge. When high-risk contacts are received, these are immediately redirected to dedicated teams. Notifications when children are missing, when children may be at risk of child sexual exploitation and when children are at risk from domestic abuse

are screened on the same day and discussed with co-located police officers to ensure that no child at risk goes unnoticed.

Children who require a single assessment are identified quickly and signposted to the duty and assessment teams. For most children, assessments are undertaken well within the local authority's required target timescales. While this means that children's needs are identified in a more timely way, too much focus is on meeting these timescales rather than on the quality of the assessment. Team managers are not yet confident in supporting social workers to set targets to complete assessments according to the individual needs of the child. Team managers are not challenging social workers enough to explore the life events that have been important for a child and their family as part of the assessment or to assist with decision-making and intervention. This means that assessments are not identifying all risks in families. Thus, children's resulting plans are not focused on what needs to change and improve or on ways in which children need to be helped and supported.

When child protection concerns are identified, a swift response to convene a strategy meeting ensures that children's immediate safeguarding needs are identified and secured. All strategy meetings are attended by South Yorkshire police (SYP) and other agencies, as appropriate, which is evidence of improvement. While the local authority has improved the recording of strategy discussions, team managers are not coordinating the timing and conduct of protective actions and the investigations required. In particular, when 'achieving best evidence' (ABE) interviews are required, South Yorkshire police are undertaking these interviews without social workers being present. Consequently, more than one agency is questioning the same child separately. Thus, the child has to tell their story more than once. Inspectors found delays in some ABE interviews taking place, thereby prolonging the investigation unnecessarily for the child and creating opportunities for the contamination or loss of evidence. There is a need for children's social care and the police to work closely together when planning investigative interviews of children, to ensure that welfare and justice imperatives are properly coordinated. South Yorkshire police responded positively to these findings during the visit and agreed to review practice with the local authority.

Supervision is taking place regularly. Social workers articulate the value of supervision. However, team managers are not recording well enough how they use supervision to assist reflection, analysis, decision-making, planning and intervention in the lives of children and their families. There is improving evidence of management oversight in children's records, and the rationale for decisions is clear in most cases. However, some managers are using too much jargon to give case direction, for example 'develop a SMART plan', rather than being explicit about what is expected of the social worker and, most importantly, about what is the intended outcome of the planned intervention or action for the child.

The implementation of a new electronic case management system is improving the way in which information is gathered, recorded and shared and is supporting more

effective performance management. Social workers and managers welcome the usability of the system. Rotherham has been very successful in recruiting, developing and retaining social workers and managers with the required skills and in improving the front door arrangements. There is a positive organisational culture, which is enabling social workers and managers to develop. All staff who spoke to inspectors described feeling valued, supported and consulted in the service improvements.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Tracey Metcalfe

Her Majesty's Inspector