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Ms Alison Botham
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Dear Ms Botham

Focused visit to Plymouth City Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Plymouth City Council children's services on 1 and 2 May 2018. The inspectors were Mandy Nightingale, HMI, and Pauline Higham, HMI.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements at the first point of contact for children who need help and protection in accordance with the Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services framework (ILACS). Specifically, they considered contacts, referrals and assessments for children in need of support and protection.

Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers and managers and other professionals working in the multi-agency hub (MAH). They also reviewed the local authority's performance management arrangements, quality assurance information and children's case records.

Overview

Plymouth's children's services were last inspected by Ofsted in 2014, when the overall effectiveness of services was judged to require improvement to be good. Since then, senior leaders and members have focused on improving services for vulnerable children. Leaders and managers know their services well and promote the development of good social work practice.

Inspectors did not identify any child at risk of harm or for whom the local authority had not provided an appropriate service.

Overall, contacts and referrals are responded to promptly. However, leaders recognise that this could be improved further. In order to achieve a consistently timely response for all children, senior managers are comprehensively restructuring services at the 'front door'.

Partnership working in the MAH results in effective decisions which safeguard children. Thresholds are applied appropriately in the gateway team, MAH and in the Plymouth referral and assessment (PRAS) teams. Interventions to meet children's needs are proportionate. The response to child protection concerns is timely. However, strategy meetings to consider the risk of significant harm to children often do not include all relevant agencies.

Performance management and management oversight are strong overall. Staff feel listened to, supported in their day-to-day practice and valued by leaders and managers.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- Child protection strategy discussions and meetings should include contributions from children's social care, police, education and health services, as a minimum, to ensure that decisions about significant harm take account of all relevant information.
- Child in need and child protection plans should clearly outline for children, families and professionals what needs to change, and should include specific attributed tasks and achievable timescales.
- Transfer of case responsibility between teams should be quicker in order to reduce delay and disruption to children and families.
- Accommodation for children requiring emergency care placements, including 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless, should be appropriate to their needs, provide protection from potential risks and promote their well-being.
- Swift implementation of the local authority's 'Safeguarding HUB and Gateway integration project plan' is needed in order to improve the quality of management.

Findings

- Senior leaders recognise the changes that are required to improve outcomes for children. They have taken action to review the structure of the assessment teams and have consulted with staff in a meaningful and effective way. The resulting changes within the PRAS teams have led to a reduction in social workers' caseloads. This means that social workers have more time to develop relationships with children, undertake direct work and complete more timely assessments. Social workers who spoke with inspectors knew children and their families well, despite often only being in contact with them for a short time.

- Agencies work well together in the MAH, and information about children and their families is shared promptly when a request is made, enabling timely decision-making.
- Thresholds are understood and are applied appropriately. Insufficient management capacity means that social workers finalise decisions when a contact does not progress to a referral. The advanced practitioner dip samples such cases and has not found any inappropriate decisions. The absence of routine oversight limits their oversight of these threshold decisions. Senior managers have identified these gaps in management oversight in the MAH and are actively addressing them through the Safeguarding HUB and Gateway integration project plan.
- Parental consent for the local authority to gather and share further information is gained in the majority of cases. However, in a small number of cases, decisions to override consent are made by social workers without consultation with a manager. This practice is not in accordance with the local authority's best practice model.
- Assessments are consistently good; they include family history and information that has been shared by other agencies. Children are consistently at the centre of assessments and their voices and experiences are clearly articulated.
- Young people who present as homeless are informed about their rights and entitlements, with clear explanations provided for what this might mean for them. This enables young people to make informed choices.
- Inspectors identified five cases where young people aged 16–17 had been placed in short-term hotel-type accommodation in an emergency. Two of these young people had been in care for some time and remained in this unsuitable accommodation for longer than two weeks; these arrangements were wholly unsatisfactory.
- When appropriate, children are seen alone by social workers and direct work is an integral part of social work practice.
- Recording of the outcome of direct work with children and parents is concise and clear and informs assessments and care planning. However, social workers cannot easily locate in case files the direct work tools they have used with children, reducing their ability to measure children's progress or to take full account of their changing experiences.
- Management oversight is evident throughout children's case records. However, it is often descriptive and with limited analysis. Managers' decisions are not always clear and the impact of management decisions and oversight on children's plans are not consistently evident.
- A variety of effective performance management tools support performance monitoring; these tools are widely used by managers and social workers.

Managers use performance information to help social workers to recognise good practice and where practice needs to improve to achieve better outcomes for children.

- The local authority designated officer role is well embedded. Arrangements for considering and responding to allegations or concerns about employees or volunteers are timely and effective. Robust action plans are put in place to safeguard children and to support the adult involved.
- Plymouth's out-of-hours service has a wide remit, covering adult and children's services, adult mental health and emergency housing. The team is well staffed with experienced workers. Regular and effective communication supports the daytime service.
- Social workers are well supported to develop their knowledge and skills through a comprehensive learning and development offer, and this contributes to good retention of staff. The recent implementation of the local authority's chosen practice model and the accompanying training programme for all social workers and managers have assisted improvement in social work practice.
- Social worker morale is high. Social workers feel listened to and supported and they demonstrate passion and commitment to improving the lives of vulnerable children.
- Most social workers told inspectors that their caseloads are manageable; performance information confirms that caseloads were decreasing during the six months preceding the visit.

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

Yours sincerely

Mandy Nightingale
Her Majesty's Inspector