

4 April 2017

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Dear Steph,

Monitoring visit of Tameside Borough Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit undertaken on 7 and 8 March 2017. The visit was the first monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in December 2016. The inspectors were Paula Thomson-Jones HMI and Lolly Rascagneres Ofsted Inspector. The local authority has made some progress in the short period since the inspection.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the area of help and protection, with a particular focus on arrangements in the public service hub (the hub) and safeguarding duty teams.

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

The inspection made some specific recommendations for improvements in the service provided to children in need of help and protection. This monitoring visit focused on four of these:

- Ensure that all areas of service have staff with a suitable level of qualification and experience for the role that they are required to undertake and that their workloads are manageable.

- Ensure that action taken by social workers is compliant with statutory guidance and that the application of thresholds in casework with children and families is appropriate.
- Ensure that the quality assurance of work by senior and middle managers routinely considers the quality of managerial decision-making and the application of thresholds at all stages of the child's involvement with the local authority, including contacts within the public service hub.
- Ensure that staff receive high-quality supervision and managerial oversight at a frequency that reflects their skills and levels of experience.

Overview

An increase in staffing has ensured that children referred to the hub are now responded to in a timely way. The employment of more experienced social workers has improved the quality of risk analysis, and work seen during the visit demonstrated that appropriate thresholds are consistently applied. In addition, increased management capacity in the hub has improved the quality and timeliness of decision-making and reduced the delay in children being provided with a service. However, the resulting increase in children requiring assessment is causing caseloads of social workers in the duty teams to continue to be too high, despite an increase in social work posts. The increase in the number of social workers is not yet matched by a corresponding increase in management capacity and, at the time of this visit, management oversight of the work was not effective in the duty teams.

Evaluation of progress

The local authority has taken action to increase social work capacity to respond to children referred to children's social care via the hub. A dedicated member of staff now reviews and processes police notifications and, during the monitoring visit, inspectors observed children referred by the police because of incidents of domestic abuse having their needs considered in a timely way. There continue to be delays of up to two weeks from when a domestic abuse incident occurs to when the police send notifications to children's social care. This means that, for some children, there can be a delay in receiving a response from social care. Senior managers in the local authority are closely monitoring the level of notifications from the police and are continuing to work with Greater Manchester Police to find a solution to address the delay.

Improvements made in the hub since the inspection mean that the timeliness and quality of the service offered to children have improved. The number of social work posts in the hub has been increased, and the local authority has ensured that these staff are suitably qualified and experienced. Information from social care records and partners is gathered and evaluated to inform timely decision-making. Appropriate application of thresholds means that children who need further assessment receive this. The recent appointment of a permanent team manager in the hub to work

alongside the existing practice manager has also resulted in improved timeliness and quality of management oversight, which is clearly recorded on children's records. These improvements are still at an early stage, and the service continues to be vulnerable to changes in demand and a reliance on a number of agency staff.

When children require further social work assessment, they are transferred quickly to social workers in the safeguarding duty teams. However, differences in the application of thresholds by the two teams result in debate between managers and inconsistent decision-making or outcomes for some children. The local authority is aware and plans to address this issue as part of the work for the planned restructure.

Although the capacity of the safeguarding duty teams has been increased, caseloads in the teams continue to be too high and, for some social workers, have increased since the inspection. Some social workers spoken to during the monitoring visit had up to 53 children on their caseload and, as a result, are under tremendous pressure and are struggling to improve the quality of their work or to record it in a timely way.

Managers ensure that children are allocated a social worker in a timely way and that social workers visit children quickly to ensure their safety and to start assessments of need. However, managers who are currently responsible for up to 13 social workers are not effective in going on to monitor the quality of social work practice. Children's records have evidence of managers having reviewed pieces of work but, in many cases, this has not resulted in appropriate action, and several examples were seen by inspectors of managers authorising inadequate assessments. The local authority is aware that their plans to further increase capacity of staff and managers need to be implemented as quickly as possible to support any further improvement and create the right conditions to enable social workers to deliver good services for children.

Social workers and team managers reported many positive changes since the inspection and that they feel that senior managers and leaders are more willing to consult with them and to listen to their concerns. Social workers reported having regular supervision, but a review of supervision files during the visit did not evidence that this is happening regularly for all staff. This lack of supervision is undermining the work to improve practice and needs significant improvement. The local authority has plans for further supervision training for managers and a renewed supervision policy for implementation in April 2017.

Although some audit work has been undertaken since the inspection, frontline managers have not had training, support or the time to enable them to complete regular audits of casework. Despite oversight by senior managers and coordination by the assistant director, the majority of the case audits reviewed during the monitoring visit were poor. Audits focused on compliance, with little comment about the quality of work and a lack of meaningful feedback for social workers, to support them to improve. In many cases, auditors have not commented on key deficits or

gaps in the service provided and have not evaluated the work done in the context of the impact and outcomes for children.

The local authority has established a head of service post to lead on the development and implementation of an effective quality assurance framework in recognition of the need for improvement. However, in order for any new framework to be effective, the entire senior management team need to ensure that they have a shared and accurate understanding of what good-quality social work practice looks like, in order that they can lead practice improvement effectively.

The local authority is in the very early stages of improving services and has a realistic view of the progress to date. The changes to arrangements at the hub have resulted in children receiving a safer and more effective response than was seen at the time of the inspection, and although the changes are still very new, this is a good first step towards improvement. The plans for reorganisation of teams and additional posts to further increase capacity need to keep pace with increasing demand in order that they address the key challenge of high caseloads and support future improvement in the quality of practice.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Paula Thomson-Jones

Her Majesty's Inspector