

14 May 2018

James Thomas
Interim Director of Children's Services
Tameside Borough Council
Wellington Road
Ashton-under-Lyne
Tameside
OL6 6DL

Dear James

Monitoring visit of Tameside Borough Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Tameside children's services on the 18 and 19 April 2018. The visit was the fifth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in December 2016. The inspectors were Shabana Abasi, HMI, Stella Elliot, HMI, and Majella Tallack, Ofsted Inspector.

The strategic direction and focus provided by the director of children's services (DCS) have accelerated the pace of change in the early help service in the last six months, showing improving outcomes for the children and families receiving early help services.

Areas covered by the visit

This visit reviewed the progress made with regards to arrangements for early help, work with early help partners and the quality of performance management.

A range of evidence was considered during this visit, including electronic case records, supervision files and notes, performance data, observation of the early help panel, and discussion with workers, managers, senior leaders and key partners delivering early help services.

Overview

The local authority's self-assessment accurately acknowledges that, during 2017, insufficient progress was made to develop Tameside local authority's early help services and how they interface with children's social care. Early help is a service priority for the council. The appointment of a dedicated lead for early help has increased capacity. This, coupled with the strategic direction and momentum provided by the new DCS and senior management team, is driving positive progress against the multi-agency early help delivery plan. The current pace of change,

combined with increased engagement by partners, is showing improving outcomes for children.

Early help workers who spoke with inspectors had a clear understanding of their work within a broader context of supporting and protecting children. They speak with authority about the children and families who they are working with. However, the quality of practice is inconsistent. The recent internal early help audit report accurately reflects the current quality of practice, and mirrors the findings of the inspectors. The early help performance data score card has recently been drafted and currently provides basic information for senior leaders.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Arrangements for the transfer of children's cases between children's social care and early help are working better than at the time of the inspection. Thresholds are appropriately applied, and the level of intervention meets the needs of children and families. The addition of an early help practice manager in the safeguarding hub has strengthened the triage process. Pathways to secure early help services are now clearer, and children and families are swiftly signposted to appropriate support services.

Decisions to step down cases are considered at the third child in need (CIN) review, where progress made by families is evaluated and informs multi-agency decision-making. The attendance of early help practice managers and workers at CIN meetings results in effective information sharing and coordination of ongoing work with children and families about risks and needs.

Decisions to step up cases from early help to children's social care evidence clear management oversight and rationale. The recording on referrals is specific about escalating concerns or risks, and contains detail and evaluation of the work already undertaken with families. This avoids children and families having to tell their stories repeatedly and reduces the potential for additional repetitive work for staff.

Recording in case notes is timely. However, the majority of chronologies are system generated and contain insufficient information or analysis to inform an understanding of historic risks, missed opportunities or the child's journey. This limits their usefulness to inform assessments and planning.

The quality of early help assessments and plans is not consistently good. Assessments often focus on the presenting issue and lack consideration of the wider context and history behind children's current circumstances. Analysis lacks precision and depth and there isn't a sufficiently strong sense of what life is like for the child. While each child has a plan, these plans are not always specific about what actions need to be undertaken or by whom. Neither are they specific about what needs to be achieved or needs to change to improve what happens for each child. Although early help workers can explain what is needed, this is not translated into robust written plans.

The voice of the child is not always recorded well within case work. While there is evidence of good-quality direct work with children, inspectors saw case recording which lacked analysis and evaluation of the work undertaken. Good-quality intensive work was seen with some families to effect rapid change, enabling them to improve their lives. Feedback is routinely sought from families about what difference the support has made to their lives. Family testimonies include more confidence in managing a child's behaviour, improved attendance at school and less conflict in the home. This is an improved picture to that seen at the time of the inspection.

Supervision of staff takes place regularly. Staff also value the regular informal support and supervision that managers provide alongside the peer support that workers receive from within the teams. However, the effectiveness of supervision is restricted because, while the actions decided are clear, they often lack timescales, and there is little evidence of reflection. This means that opportunities are being missed to improve practice and staff understanding of how they can make a difference.

Managers and early help workers demonstrate an energy and commitment that is reflected in the knowledge and understanding they have of the families they work with. Team stability ensures that children can build trusting relationships with their workers, resulting in strong engagement with interventions and improved outcomes. This is a much better position than has been evident in some teams on earlier monitoring visits.

Children and families in Tameside can access a broad range of early help services. However, early help is heavily led by the local authority and although there is evidence of increasing engagement by partners, the early help agenda is not yet fully owned by partners. Partners lack confidence in undertaking the role of lead professional. In recognition of this, the local authority has established a common assessment framework (CAF) adviser team, to support wider partnership engagement with the CAF, increase the number of early help assessments and to support partners when undertaking the lead professional role.

Initiatives such as CAF advisers, CAF champions in each agency, multi-agency membership on the early help panel, co-location of workers, joint working with families, and multi-agency CAF training are having a positive impact on partner agencies' understanding of and commitment to the early help offer. This puts services in a strong position for further collaboration, which would benefit children and families.

The Early Help Assessment and Quality Assurance Framework was implemented in February 2018 to strengthen quality assurance and performance management. It is too early to evaluate the contribution that auditing of casework makes to practice improvement. The early help score card is in its infancy and requires further development to ensure that it provides sufficient robust information, and gives elected members, senior leaders and managers a clear overview of the effectiveness

of the early help service. At this current time, the service lacks any overarching analysis of the impact of early help at a strategic or operational multi-agency level.

This visit has found evidence of improvement in the pace of change, which has led to positive progress being made in relation to early help services. Leaders and managers are acutely aware of the challenges that they face to embed these changes and develop the service further while simultaneously addressing the areas of weaker practice. They recognise that there is more work to be undertaken to ensure that practice is consistently good and that the best outcomes are achieved for all children.

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

Yours sincerely

Shabana Abasi
Her Majesty's Inspector