

8 February 2019

Mr Matt Dunkley
Director of Children's Services
Sessions House
Maidstone
Kent
ME14 1XQ

Dear Mr Dunkley,

Focused visit to Kent county council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Kent county council children's services on 14 and 15 January 2019. The inspectors were Kate Malleson, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Stephanie Murray, Senior Her Majesty's Inspector.

Inspectors reviewed the local authority's arrangements for managing contacts and referrals at the 'front door' and decision-making in relation to children who need help and protection. This included the quality of the front door response to children at risk of exploitation and the effectiveness of the role of the designated officer. Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including children's case records, case discussions with social workers and managers, multi-agency meetings, and performance management and quality assurance information.

Overview

Ofsted last inspected Kent county council children's services in 2017, giving an overall judgement of good, with the response to children who need help and protection graded as requiring improvement to be good. The local authority has appropriately acted on feedback from the last inspection, with a firm focus on improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the front door service. Since October 2018, there has been a single integrated route for accessing early help, intensive and higher level statutory social work services. Early signs are that the new arrangements have been implemented well.

Leaders demonstrate a desire to provide services for children and families by starting work with them at the lowest level that is appropriate to their needs. However, they acknowledge that, at the front door, this must include careful and robust management oversight and quality assurance of decisions. Through corporate investment, they have increased senior and operational management capacity at the front door and have strengthened management oversight of the newly configured service.

Most decisions about helping and protecting children seen by inspectors were appropriate. Multi-agency information-sharing is used well to inform decision-making, and practitioners are thoughtful in the way they engage with, and respond to, parents. The out-of-hours service is responsive, so there is no delay in taking necessary action outside office hours.

Managers swiftly triage all new referrals. In a small number of cases, triaging decisions by managers did not take sufficient account of all likely risk factors, and initial recommendations are not always fully reviewed in the light of front door enquiries. For a few children, the initial response by the early help hub, once cases were transferred, was not timely enough. In the light of inspectors' findings, the local authority's pre-existing plans to review the process for triage decision-making are appropriate and timely.

The local authority strives to be forward-thinking in practice development, as shown by the very recent successful bid to develop a contextual safeguarding approach to adolescent vulnerability and a strategic focus on developing trauma-informed integrated adolescent services.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- the existing audit methodology, to increase the focus on the impact of practice on improving outcomes for children
- initial front door decision-making, to ensure that triage decisions comprehensively consider and record the potential or likely risks to children and that next steps are recorded with a commensurate level of urgency
- multi-agency action planning for vulnerable and exploited adolescents to ensure that this is outcome-focused, time limited and rigorously followed up
- the timeline of the initial response to children who are transferred to the early help service.

Findings

- The front door is a high-volume but efficiently run service. Staff working in the front door service have welcomed the recent changes and can see the benefit of them.
- Contacts and referrals receive prompt review by experienced and knowledgeable managers, and management oversight was present in all cases seen by inspectors. All the decisions reviewed by inspectors had taken account of known information. Almost all work progresses swiftly from referral to outcome and most decisions about the level of help that children need are proportionate. Inspectors found a small, but important, number of cases where, in their triage decision-making, managers had not given enough weight to potential risks for children

when deciding on the level and nature of the enquiries that should be undertaken by the front door staff. Senior managers were reflective in their response to this feedback from inspectors and are actively considering how they can use this feedback to strengthen early decision-making at the front door.

- In almost all cases, social workers contact parents without delay, to discuss openly the concerns that have been received by the front door. Staff display a sensitive and respectful approach to family circumstances and complexities. In cases seen, parents of disabled children received a prompt response to requests for support. Managers and social workers give feedback to referrers about the outcome of their requests for support.
- In most cases, managers and front door staff think carefully about the need to seek parents' consent before asking agencies to share information about them. In a small number of cases, the rationale for dispensing with consent had not been recorded well by non-qualified staff.
- In the majority of cases seen by inspectors, decisions to transfer work to one of the two tiers of the local authority's early help service were appropriate. However, in a small number of cases, the level or nature of the concern warranted either a social work assessment or a more timely response to children's needs. Senior managers are in the process of analysing the reason for some cases being stepped up to children's social care soon after being transferred to the early help service.
- When child protection concerns are referred to the front door, in the majority of cases the response is proportionate and prompt. This includes the out-of-hours service. Strategy discussions undertaken by the front door service are comprehensive, and the steps needed to protect children are clear and well recorded. Relevant agencies attend, and there is evidence of effective multi-agency working and assertive practice in relation to specific risks and concerns.
- Although most police referrals about children's exposure to domestic abuse are comprehensive, in a few cases there is delay in the front door receiving these notifications and not all police referrals include a domestic abuse risk assessment. When risk assessments are included, they are helpful to front door staff in planning a proportionate response.
- Live and retrospective performance information about activity at the front door is helpful to managers. Managers maintain good oversight of performance, supplementing this information with manual tools and systems where necessary. A new electronic system, designed to improve management oversight of day-to-day business across the service, is nearing implementation.
- The response at the front door to children who are missing is well organised, despite the large volume of such notifications. Experienced and competent staff quickly and accurately log, assimilate and appropriately share information about

missing children. When children are found, well-recorded notifications contain important and helpful information which informs next steps. Kent county council encourages, and often chases, other local authorities to undertake return home interviews and to feed back the information and intelligence they receive. An independent return interview resource is available for other local authorities to commission if needed.

- Family group conferences (FGCs) for adolescents who go missing are examples of innovative practice. Early indications are that this approach has reduced the frequency of missing episodes for a small number of highly vulnerable children. FGCs address the 'push' factors for children who feel disconnected from their families, and these meetings support the development of positive relationships between extended family members. This provides children with a source of help and support which they can access as an alternative to running away.
- Assessments of teenagers who are vulnerable and at risk of exploitation include comprehensive information about children's circumstances and the harm that they face. There is considerable, and mostly relevant, information-sharing by a committed multi-agency partnership at adolescent risk management panels across Kent. However, action planning from these meetings needs to be more outcome-focused, better informed by children's views, time-limited and consistently and rigorously followed up. Partner membership needs to be at the right level of seniority to have greater influence as well as operational oversight.
- Following its review and re-configuration, the local authority designated officer service is increasingly well organised and visible. There is evidence of careful tracking, oversight and coordination when there are allegations about adults who work with children. In the cases reviewed by inspectors, children's immediate safety had been prioritised, with further consideration of risks posed by the adult concerned.
- The quality assurance framework demonstrates a clear commitment by senior leaders and managers to using a range of methods, including case audits and peer review challenge as a means of improving practice. However, audits seen by inspectors did not sufficiently consider the lived experience of children or the impact of the work undertaken. The local authority is taking steps to address this, but the desired quality has not yet been achieved.

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

Yours sincerely

Kate Malleson
Her Majesty's Inspector