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Dear Chris Baird

Focused visit to Herefordshire local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Herefordshire local authority children's services on 22 January 2019. The inspectors were Brenda McInerney, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Pauline Higham, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for receiving referrals about children who may be in need or at risk of significant harm, children transferring to and from early help services, the effectiveness of child protection enquiries and the quality of assessments and interventions for children in need of help and protection.

Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers and managers. They also evaluated local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records. The findings in this letter relate only to cases seen as part of this visit.

Overview

Since the last inspection of children's services in June 2018, and from a very low baseline, actions taken by senior leaders have improved the overall stability of the social care workforce, increased much needed management capacity and reduced overall social work caseloads across the service. This has been achieved very recently and over a relatively short period of time.

Plans for improvement are appropriately focused on core areas that make the most difference to the lives of children. Senior leaders and managers have a realistic view of the quality of practice, which remains too variable and is not yet good.

Revised performance management and quality assurance approaches have been in place for only a few months and are starting to show some very early impact. Leaders in Herefordshire continue to work closely with high-performing Partners in Practice from within the social care sector in order to evaluate the impact of and inform their improvement planning.

The pace of progress has been hampered by staff turnover and difficulties recruiting to key management positions, such as lead officer for quality assurance. There continues to be strong political and corporate support for children's services. At a time of budget pressures, elected members have recently agreed further investment in children's services.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- Application, by partners, of thresholds for making referrals for statutory social work intervention.
- Quality of assessments, including the time taken to complete assessments and the level of frequency of visits to children.
- Management oversight and social work supervision.
- Understanding the experiences of children and families subject to repeat child in need assessments.

Findings

- Since the last inspection, there has been an increased stability in the management and functioning of the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) and assessment service. The approach of leaders to have 'the right cases in the right place' has resolved a backlog of assessments, has reduced caseloads and is now allowing teams to focus on the timeliness and quality of assessments. When children are at risk of significant harm, there is a timely and effective response to help and protect them.
- The effectiveness of responses in the MASH has been maintained and improved since the last inspection. Strong partnership arrangements at the front door support prompt information-sharing and participation in multi-agency strategy discussions. Quality assurance in the MASH is well developed, and regular multi-agency audits review the application of thresholds and the quality of decision-making.
- However, for some partners, such as the police and some health professionals, the understanding of thresholds for statutory intervention remains underdeveloped, despite this having been recognised by leaders for some time. Too many families continue to be referred without their knowledge and consent, despite clear guidance for professionals published and made available by the local safeguarding board. Notifications from the police are not yet risk assessed before being shared with children's social care, and this continues to place additional pressures on the MASH manager.
- A recently introduced early help coordinator based in the MASH is supporting families to access early help when the threshold for statutory services is not met. When families do not return the necessary paperwork to progress early help, staff do not track this. As a result, in some cases, children's presenting needs are not always being addressed in a timely way.
- Decision-making following contacts to children's social care, including those out of hours, is proportionate and results in the timely progression of referrals to statutory services. Decisions to look after children in emergency circumstances are considered and appropriate and the rationale for decision-making is clearly recorded.
- Strategy discussions to consider children at risk of significant harm are consistently timely and well attended by key professionals. Most child protection enquiries are child-centred and identify the risks to children and result in immediate safety planning. However, practice in a very small number of cases seen was not sufficiently child-centred. Child protection medicals and resulting written reports from paediatricians are very timely and support proportionate decision-making for children.

- Child in need assessments consider family history and include children's views about their lived experiences. Children are seen alone when appropriate. Social workers do not always visit children at a frequency consistent with their needs, although gaps in case recording mean that there is not always evidence of all activity undertaken during assessments. Some children wait too long between social work visits. Thresholds applied at the completion of assessments and child protection enquiries are proportionate and progression to initial child protection conferences is timely for most children.
- As well as the immediate presenting issues, the wider needs of families are identified and addressed by social workers undertaking children's assessments. As a result, families are helped with a range of issues such as housing, finances and accessing adult mental health services. This is particularly important in a county where some children are experiencing the impact of low family income and rural isolation.
- The quality of the initial planning for children following assessment or child protection enquiries is variable. While better plans were well informed by a considered analysis and do not lose sight of recent concerns, some plans do not clearly state the required outcomes for children and are too focused on the services the adults need to take up.
- For a small number of children, assessments do not always translate into the provision of effective help to divert them from statutory services. This includes children who experience repeated assessments and is reflected in the recent high rates of re-referrals, which in one month accounted for nearly a third of all assessments. A high number of child in need assessments seen by inspectors involved families being 'stepped up' from partner agencies and the early help service, only for professionals to decide that children did not meet the threshold for social work intervention. More needs to be done to improve the way such cases are reviewed and progressed when early help is not improving the experiences of children.
- Use of performance management information is beginning to support some improvements in key areas of practice, such as the timeliness of assessments and assuring that children are being visited regularly. While further work is required to improve the accuracy of performance information, management grip and understanding of the service has significantly improved since the last inspection. While team managers spoke positively to inspectors about how they use weekly performance reports, it is too early to see whether the quality of practice is consistently improving.
- While there has been a recent reduction in social work caseloads, a very small number of newly qualified social workers undertaking, or recently completing, their Assessed and Supported Year in Employment report that, prior to this, the numbers of cases allocated to them were not manageable and had prevented them from attending key training. While recruitment and retention of social

workers is a high priority for senior leaders, it is too early to be assured that they will be able to sustain appropriate caseload numbers.

- Leaders recognise that quality assurance is not yet delivering improvements in consistency of practice. A recently implemented programme of case file auditing is providing a largely accurate evaluation of practice and includes audits completed by senior leaders. The actions arising from audits are not adequately tracked, and some children's cases have continued to drift following an audit.
- The level of management oversight of casework is improving but does not yet robustly challenge less effective practice in some cases. Key decisions are not always noted on children's case records. Social work supervision is not yet sufficiently regular or reflective, although this is improving. Social workers spoke positively about their supportive team managers and case consultations with heads of service.
- Leaders are implementing ambitious strategic plans for the recruitment and retention of social workers and this is starting to show some early impact in some parts of the service. Social workers are benefiting from an improved training offer, and opportunities to develop, for example by becoming practice educators or by progressing to more senior posts, with mentoring for new team managers.
- Senior leaders have taken steps to understand the experience of frontline practitioners in response to recommendations from the previous inspection. Drop-in sessions with the director and assistant director and spending time in fieldwork teams mean that senior leaders are now more visible. Social workers spoke of the support from senior leaders, such as the reduction in caseloads to a manageable level. Staff forums provide frontline staff with opportunities to share worries and to contribute ideas, for example the new personal 'learning fund' available for social workers.

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

Yours sincerely

Brenda McInerney
Her Majesty's Inspector