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Ms Tina Russell
Director of Children's Services
County Hall
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Dear Tina

Focused visit to Worcestershire County Council children's services

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic.

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Worcestershire County Council children's services on 13 and 14 July 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were John Roughton and Nick Bennison.

Worcestershire statutory children's social care functions are delegated to Worcestershire Children First. Inspectors looked at arrangements for the front door.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. However, the delivery model was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 context. The lead inspector and the director of children's services agreed arrangements to deliver this visit effectively while working within national and local guidelines for responding to COVID-19. This visit was carried out on site, with inspectors using video calls for local authority staff when they were unable to be office based.

Headline findings

The local authority has made strong progress in improving the quality of practice for children and families in receipt of services at its 'Family Front Door' since the inspection in June 2019. Leaders have established a positive culture of commitment to continuous improvement across this service area, supported by particularly strong quality assurance arrangements. The early help partnership is now well engaged in the delivery of services, and most schools in Worcestershire have an early help offer, bespoke to the needs of their community. This progress is not yet reflected in an overarching strategy or plan to ensure universal awareness of the partnership's approach and provision.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- Partnership-wide understanding of the early help strategy.
- Timeliness of referrals from, and joint management of strategy meetings with, police.
- Recording of management rationale for the timing of strategy meetings and interim safety planning.

Main findings

The local authority and wider partnership have planned and delivered a well-coordinated and effective response to the pandemic. Actions have been swift and well considered, ensuring an appropriate focus on supporting the most vulnerable children and families. Social workers have been well supported during COVID-19 and enabled to work safely and effectively according to individual need. A positive culture of continuous improvement is now embedded across the service.

Children and families in Worcestershire benefit from a swift and proportionate response to new contacts. Initial management screening and guidance inform thorough partner agency checks and prompt analysis, leading to management sign off and appropriate next steps.

Where parental consent is not obtained by the referrer, attempts are quickly made to do so, and equally where consent is overridden, the rationale for doing so is appropriate and clearly recorded.

The allocation of work from the contact and referral pods to assessment teams is timely and appropriate, ensuring that children's needs are quickly identified and begin to be addressed.

Most children who experience domestic violence within their family receive a timely service. Clear and timely assessments result in appropriate decisions being made about their protection. These children receive prompt interventions that reduce risks. However, due to delays in referrals being received from police, a small number of children who experience domestic violence are not being considered at strategy meetings or assessed swiftly enough to respond to their immediate need for protection. Senior leaders are aware of this issue and are proactively addressing this with the police.

When there is any delay in the convening of strategy meetings, the management rationale and any interim safety plan are not consistently or clearly recorded. Despite this risk, no child was found to have suffered detriment as a result. Immediate action

is being taken by leaders to address this. When strategy meetings are held, they are appropriate and well attended, although actions are not always timebound.

Children who are at risk of criminal or sexual exploitation in Worcestershire are identified through multi-agency referrals and effective 'Get Safe' risk assessments and reviews. Advice and support are available to all social workers from the 'Get Safe' service, and multi-agency sexual exploitation meetings are held appropriately to manage and support those children at higher risk. Senior leaders oversee trends and themes, helping to identify hot spots and ensure disruption activity.

Children and families assessed as not requiring a statutory social work response by the Family Front Door are stepped down to early help services or signposted appropriately, ensuring a timely and proportionate response. Most children who need early help support receive a service that is multi-agency, reflective and responsive to their needs. Children benefit from creative direct work, and the voice of the child is considered in early help assessments.

Children and families benefit from thorough and proportionate assessments of need by social workers. Prompt allocation of children's cases and the routine consideration of their history, partner agency information and the views of children and families, inform analysis and recommendations. Direct work with children to elicit their views is consistently completed in accordance with their age, language and communication abilities and preferences. Management oversight is well considered, appropriately informing next steps.

Social workers receive regular supervision and personal development opportunities. This is helping to achieve an increasingly stable, permanent workforce who are skilled, committed and highly motivated.

The quality assurance framework is a strong area of practice, well embedded internally and across the safeguarding partnership. In particular, the audit approach is very effective. Children's case file audits are well moderated and identified actions followed through to completion, making a real time difference to improving interventions in case work. Collective learning from quality assurance activity, including extensive child and family feedback, is used well to inform service improvement.

Leaders have developed seamless referral and transitional arrangements to ensure that children and families experience minimal delay within the Family Front Door so that children gain the right service at the right time. To support their line of sight and assurance of effectiveness, senior leaders have a clear and detailed understanding of the performance of the Family Front Door and its impact on outcomes for children. Performance management reporting arrangements ensure that leaders and managers quickly identify practice issues and themes, and respond accordingly.

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

Yours sincerely

John Roughton
Her Majesty's Inspector