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Dear Ms James

Focused visit to Bristol children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Bristol children's services on 7 to 8 December 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Tracey Ledger and Louise Hocking.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for 'front door' services, including decision-making for referrals about children, child protection enquiries, decisions to step up or down from early help, and emergency action out of office hours.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

Headline findings

Children who are referred to Bristol City Council's 'First Assessment Service' (FAS) because there are concerns about their safety or welfare receive a child-centred service from capable and dedicated staff. Continuously improving practice at the front door ensures that children receive the right services at the right time. Careful consideration of risk and the appropriate application of different thresholds for intervention mean that children almost always receive timely support that is well matched to their individual needs and circumstances. Strong, effective leaders have systematically strengthened practice and decision-making at the front door despite the additional pressures of COVID-19. Staff report feeling safe and supported. Strong partnership working between the local authority and partner agencies means that when children are referred to the FAS due to concerns about their welfare, the response of staff is effective in identifying and assessing needs and risks and agreeing next steps. However, for a few children, the rationale for obtaining information from other agencies is not always clearly recorded and it is not always apparent if consent has been obtained from families. Children who are referred to the FAS because they are at risk of extra-familial harm, such as criminal or sexual exploitation, benefit from specialist services that consider individual, peer and

community risks. This helps children to go on to receive targeted support that helps to reduce risk, provides strong support and has a focus on disrupting perpetrators.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice?

- The consistency with which the reasons for contacting particular agencies to gather information about children and families are recorded.
- How clearly and consistently the rationale for dispensing with parental consent is recorded when this has been necessary before undertaking checks with partner agencies.

Main findings

The high priority given to the voices of children is a strong, positive theme that threads through all aspects of the work of the FAS and other front door services. This is the case at both the strategic planning level and at the level of work with individual children and their families. Social workers undertake meaningful direct work with children. Children's wishes and views are captured well. For example, some children have age-appropriate copies of safety plans. This means that they know they have been listened to and what to do should they need help again in the future.

One innovative and successful piece of work to help further improve the child-focus and effectiveness of the FAS is the 'secret shopper initiative'. Volunteer children, who have previous experience of social work intervention, were supported to contact the FAS anonymously to test out the system and response they received, and to identify potential improvements. Managers then acted swiftly, listening to the messages from children and implementing learning. For example, the telephone system has been changed so that children who call can now press the first option available to speak to someone.

Referrals about children made by partner agencies are largely appropriate. Social workers are good at understanding and considering children's past histories when they are assessing current needs and levels of risk. This helps to identify proportionate next steps. Urgent safeguarding situations are responded to immediately. This ensures that children and their families almost always get the right support and help when they need it. For a very few children for whom there are no immediate known child protection concerns, their referrals are not dealt with as quickly as they could be. This means that there is sometimes delay in fully understanding their needs and identifying appropriate interventions.

Initial assessment of risk and need is effective. Staff in the FAS have a good understanding of the different thresholds for intervention and how to apply them. This means that they are applied appropriately for the vast majority of children and

children go on to receive services and other support that is generally well matched to their individual needs and situations.

Information is gathered and used effectively to inform evaluation and plan intervention. For a small minority of children, the rationale for obtaining information from other agencies is not always clearly recorded and it is not always apparent if consent has been obtained from families.

The early help service is a well-integrated part of the front door response. When children are referred for an early help service but assessment shows that they actually need a statutory social work response, this is identified promptly. Effective systems are in place to escalate these children's cases. Early help workers and social workers often work together in these circumstances to ensure consistency for children and their families. Likewise, when children no longer need a statutory social work intervention and can appropriately be supported by early help services, good handovers take place to ensure the right level of support continues.

Children needing social work support in the evenings and at weekends receive an effective service. In common with daytime services, staff work well with partner agencies and communicate decisions and actions with the FAS to ensure continuity. Staff who work in the out-of-hours service feel supported, as senior leaders are available should they need them, and they are familiar with children's information.

Staff at all levels in the FAS are passionate about and dedicated to their work. They talk about children with warmth. Practitioners are attuned to identifying inequality and its impact and to the diverse needs and identities of children and their families, and this is reflected well in their work. They have a solid skill and knowledge base. This equips them to undertake their roles with confidence. Staff devote a considerable amount of time and pay care and attention to detail in considering the information presented to them. This supports managers to make the right decisions for children.

Staff in the FAS are reflective and analytical. The local authority's strengths-based model of social work practice is embedded into all aspects of work undertaken at the front door. This provides social workers with a structure and approach to working with children and families that they like. It helps them to identify and focus on the strengths and weaknesses and plan effective interventions. There is a focus on continuously improving relationships with families and working alongside them.

Some strong working relationships with partner agencies have developed and the positive impact of this is evident in a number of areas. For example, the multi-agency daily incident review meeting makes rapid and effective decisions to support children living in homes where domestic abuse is a concern to get the help they need at the time that they need it.

Tackling extra-familial harm, including exploitation and knife crime, is a priority for the local authority and its partner agencies. Strong working relationships with the

police have resulted in a shared culture of collaborative and child-focused working. Children's welfare is at the centre of practice and they are considered primarily as victims. Initiatives linked to drugs and the carrying of knives in education settings have resulted in fewer children experiencing school moves, suspensions, and exclusions.

The local authority designated officer is highly skilled and experienced, carrying out her work to a high standard. When there are safeguarding concerns about adults who work with children, these are managed swiftly and effectively.

There have been significant changes to the structure of the front door over the past year. These include smaller teams and reduced, manageable caseloads. Leaders have managed this change well. They have communicated well with staff and engaged them in the process of shaping and implementing improvements in how services are delivered. This, in turn, has meant that children are receiving a service that is making a positive difference to their safety and wider welfare.

There is a genuine commitment to using direct feedback to improve practice. This is driven at all levels, including by senior leaders. This engagement with children and their families helps shape and develop services.

Senior leaders have engaged their partner agencies effectively in driving improvement. These strong relationships are at both an operational and a strategic level. There is evidence of a shared learning culture where challenge is embraced and lessons learned. Leaders are external facing, seeking feedback from other local authorities and partners. This improvement has been achieved against the backdrop of all agencies dealing with the pressures of the pandemic.

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

Yours sincerely

Tracey Ledder
Her Majesty's Inspector