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Dear Amanda

Focused visit to Warrington children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Warrington children's services on 15 and 16 December 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Lorna Schlechte and Lisa Walsh.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for the 'front door'.

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

Headline findings

The local authority continues to provide an effective and well-coordinated multi-agency response at the front door for children and young people. When children are at risk of harm, their needs are recognised in a timely way, which ensures that most children receive the right help at the right time. There continues to be a well-developed response from partners, which supports professionals to work in an integrated way with the most vulnerable children and families. There is a strong focus on learning and improvement, with regular audits of practice and a clear understanding of areas of strength and development.

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

- Capturing the voice of the child in case records, so that their wishes and feelings are clearly expressed and inform future planning.
- The recording of decision-making at child protection conferences, so that the rationale for next steps is clear.

Main findings

There has been a very high rate of COVID-19 infection in Warrington during the pandemic. This has led to increased pressure across the system, a rise in the number and complexity of referrals, and a recognition from senior leaders of the impact of

the pandemic on the emotional well-being of the workforce. Safeguarding processes have remained robust, children have continued to be seen face to face, and partner agencies have maintained a focus on the improvement priorities throughout various lockdowns and local restrictions.

Children in need of help and protection are identified promptly in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). Their complex needs are responded to well and they receive appropriate support. Screening of referrals is detailed, timely and RAG-rated in recognition of strengths and risk. There is effective information-sharing with a wide range of partners within the MASH. Consent is sought appropriately and clearly recorded.

The management rationale for decision-making about next steps is clear on the child's record and revised screening form, which helps social workers to prioritise their work and respond quickly to children's needs and vulnerabilities. Children are signposted promptly to appropriate levels of help and support, including stepping down to early help services. Feedback to referrers is not always clearly recorded and this has been identified as an area for improvement, through regular auditing and managerial scrutiny of front door activity.

There has been an increase in the early help offer for families since the last inspection. This has led to an increase in early help assessments being completed and a good range of support being provided. The local authority has clear processes in place to monitor and review the effectiveness of early help for families, and it has increased capacity to triage early help referrals in the MASH. Monthly performance reporting provides helpful commentary to identify key themes and trends. Children and families sometimes wait for allocation within early help for a short period, but this is managed appropriately with regular telephone support until the case is allocated.

Partnerships are strong and effective in the MASH, with a continued emphasis on relationship-based working and a systemic approach. Agencies work collaboratively to share information and respond to risk in a timely way. Education and health colleagues work alongside social care and the police effectively to ensure that vulnerabilities are recognised early, and a multi-agency response is put in place promptly to support children and families. Daily risk meetings are held virtually with partners during the pandemic, providing a useful forum for information to be shared about police notifications. This ensures that the most appropriate support for children is identified quickly.

The response to domestic abuse is child-centred, and informed by routine conversations with partner agencies in the MASH. This ensures that practitioners consider history and cumulative harm in their assessment of risk and are appropriately focused on understanding the wider range of factors impacting on family relationships. Independent domestic violence advocate (IDVA) support at the front door is highly valued by partners and includes a wide range of targeted, accessible programmes for victims, male and female perpetrators, and their families.

'Operation Encompass' is well embedded within school settings and is supported by a pilot of 'healing champions', developed with partners to focus on providing additional emotional support to children who experience domestic abuse.

Timely and proportionate action is taken when children need a social work response out of office hours. Information is appropriately shared and out-of-hours social workers are able to access the children's services electronic database, in order to make informed decisions to keep children safe. The interface between the out-of-hours service and daytime services is well established and effectively recorded, and this leads to timely and appropriate responses to children and families.

When cases progress from the MASH for a social work service, assessments are well written, timely and with clear evaluation of strengths and risk, leading to appropriate recommendations for next steps. They contain effective information-gathering regarding family history and how this has an impact on current circumstances. The voice of the child and family is included but is not always explicitly stated or considered. Most assessments consider multi-agency information appropriately. All contain managerial oversight, providing clear endorsement of social work recommendations and case direction regarding next steps.

Strategy meetings are timely and identify risk appropriately. A small number of strategy meetings are too briefly recorded, although the majority are more detailed and include a wider range of agencies to ensure more robust information-sharing. The voice of the child is not always clearly recorded, despite the fact that children are often seen quickly and efforts made to seek their views by the social worker. The local authority has completed a recent audit of strategy meetings, and is clearly sighted on the quality of practice.

When children are at risk of significant harm the response is swift and effective and decision-making is clear about when it is appropriate to escalate to both single and joint section 47 enquiries. Child protection enquiries appropriately consider history and collate relevant information from partners to inform next steps. Outcomes following a section 47 enquiry are mostly appropriate and include a rationale about whether concerns are substantiated. However, in a very small number of cases, this was not clearly recorded or responded to effectively. Senior leaders acknowledged this during the visit, and took appropriate steps to address the issue.

The rationale for multi-agency decisions is not always clear on the child protection conference record. This was raised with senior leaders during the visit, as a significant number of children do not progress to a child protection plan following the initial child protection conference. Inspectors were shown a detailed analysis of this cohort of children following the local authority's own themed audit. This identified that a number of children who have progressed to conference have been made subject to a contextual safeguarding plan due to risks of child exploitation. In other cases of domestic abuse, improved levels of parental engagement supported the decision for a child in need plan. However, it is sometimes difficult to understand the

rationale for such decisions, as the conference template does not clearly collate the views of accountable agencies into a clear analysis of current risk to inform subsequent decision-making.

Senior managers have a coherent and intelligent approach to performance management. They access regular and detailed data to identify areas for further scrutiny, which is enabling managers to identify emerging themes and quickly adapt practice in response.

Quality assurance activity has continued at pace throughout the pandemic. This has included two practice weeks this year, and there are regular weekly and monthly thematic audits of areas of front door activity. This has led to appropriate tracking of audit actions to systematically improve practice. Audits are completed collaboratively with social workers to aid learning. Findings identify corrective actions and additional training for staff to improve social work practice. For example, audits identified the need to address parental engagement through motivational interviewing techniques, which has led to training being commissioned. Senior managers know the quality of services very well because of the routine nature of such quality assurance activity, and this provides a clear foundation for continued service improvement.

Recruitment and retention remain key priorities for improvement planning. Senior leaders are appropriately sighted on the pressure points, and there has been additional investment and increased capacity at the front door in response. This has led to the introduction of a deputy team manager role and six additional social work posts across the service during the pandemic. An additional social work post and IDVA in the MASH have also been agreed more recently.

Staff report positively about working in the local authority and have embraced the systemic model of practice, which has led to more reflective discussions and a strong emphasis on relationship-based social work. Senior leaders continually strive to make this a learning organisation and are receptive to feedback about the quality of practice. There are regular opportunities for staff to engage with managers, who are visible, accessible and supportive.

Caseloads are too high in some teams and staff turnover means that there are still too many changes of social worker for some children. Senior leaders understand the reasons for this and have taken appropriate action, including reviewing payment rates. There has also been a commitment to support the emotional well-being of social workers, with additional funding secured to recruit a clinical psychologist 'life coach' to help social workers cope with the demands of a challenging, complex work environment. This is an interesting and innovative development to support the workforce, which demonstrates that senior leaders value their social workers.

There is a clear commitment to supporting services at the front door to develop and expand, with additional funding secured for specialist health posts linked to

recognising neurodevelopmental needs for children. Contextual safeguarding is linked in appropriately at the front door and governance is appropriate. Relationships between agencies are mature and there is a culture of high support and challenge.

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

Yours sincerely

Lorna Schlechte
Her Majesty's Inspector