

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231
Textphone 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Helen Brackenbury
Director of Children and Families
Children and Families Services
Cheshire West and Chester Council
Floor 1
Civic Way
Ellesmere Port
CH65 0BE

Dear Ms Brackenbury

Focused visit to Cheshire West and Chester children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Cheshire West and Chester children's services on 7 and 8 December 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Nick Bennison and John Roughton.

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. Inspectors were primarily on site, meeting with local authority staff either in person or via video link. During the pandemic, social workers continued to respond to contacts and referrals into the local authority and assess and support children through a mix of remote visits using technology and face-to-face visits, based on risk assessments. Since COVID-19 restrictions have been reduced, visits to see children by social workers are all face to face.

Headline findings

Since the inspection in 2019, the local authority has continued to strengthen the quality of practice for children and families in receipt of services at its Integrated Access and Referral Team Front door. Senior leaders are passionate about creating a service that is sensitive to children and their families and have created a culture of learning and development that is strongly reflected by their staff group. There is strong political leadership and cross-party support for children's services, which means that the needs of vulnerable children are prioritised. Children and their families benefit from access to comprehensive early help provision and a strong, well-coordinated domestic abuse service. 'Our Ways of Working', the local authority developed practice model, is well understood and informs practice.

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

- Safety planning for children, in advance of initial child protection plans being formalised.
- Quality assurance arrangements, to ensure that actions are completed, and children's and parents' feedback is sought to inform practice for children.
- Actions and timescales should be clearly recorded in supervision records.

Main findings

Children and families benefit from a timely response to contacts and referrals into the local authority's front door service. Lateral checks are swiftly completed and information gathering is thorough, with a clear analysis of concerns and strengths within family networks. Parental consent is generally gained. Where there are safeguarding concerns and consent is dispensed with, this is agreed at an appropriate management level and clearly recorded. There is robust management oversight throughout these processes, which ensures that children's safeguarding and welfare needs are well understood, and they receive the right help at the right time.

When children are stepped down to early help services, they receive a thorough assessment that identifies need and results in a clear multi-agency plan, which is developed with the family. Children benefit from a comprehensive range of early help services and interventions that meet their needs. This responsiveness to children's needs at an early stage prevents them escalating to statutory children's services.

Children who do require statutory services receive a timely response from social work teams in the area in which they live. Assessments undertaken by these locality teams are thorough and timely and sensitively gather children's views as well as those of parents and other agencies. Social workers know their children well and can articulate a clear analysis of their needs. The assessment work is a strong area of practice. Management oversight consistently ensures actions to safeguard and promote the welfare of children are progressed. While assessments are being undertaken, any immediate identified needs are responded to promptly and children benefit from access to support and services. This means that there is no delay in children gaining early help to improve their experiences.

When children are at risk of harm, strategy meetings are timely and attended by all relevant agencies. These meetings result in clear and appropriate risk assessments and timely multi-agency decision-making. Where the threshold is met for a section 47 inquiry, the majority are thorough and provide a detailed analysis of risk. Where section 47 inquiries identify risk, prompt action is taken to safeguard children. Safety plans are in place for children following the section 47 inquiry. Social workers understand what actions are needed to safeguard children and can clearly verbalise

them. However, the safety plans were not on children's records. When inspectors raised this, senior leaders took immediate action to progress this area of recording.

Children mostly experience timely and appropriate progression to initial child protection conferences. In a small number of cases, there has been a delay in initial child protection conferences taking place. The rationale for this is not always made clear on children's records. For some of these children the delay was reasonable and proportionate. The local authority acknowledged the lack of recorded rationale and gave assurances that they would address this.

Child exploitation risk assessments are routinely completed by referring agencies when they have identified concerns that a child may be at risk of exploitation. Weekly child exploitation hub meetings help to promote effective information-sharing between partners and appropriate interventions are provided to reduce exploitation risk. Peer mapping is used effectively to understand potential links and relationships and ensure a coordinated approach to disruption and risk management.

Children and families benefit from a strong and coordinated response to domestic abuse. The Domestic Abuse Intervention and Prevention Service is helping to ensure a joined-up approach, so that victims, perpetrators and children of the family are well supported. Children and families have access to a range of interventions to reduce risk and increase safety, for example, the 'Jigsaw' and 'Gateway' programmes for recovering child and adult victims. The quality of information from the police has improved, and the voice of the child, or observations, are routinely recorded, helping to inform next steps and support for children and their families.

Social workers receive regular supervision, however, records are variable in quality and any resulting actions lack timescales. This can lead to a lack of focus on timely and effective planning for children.

The local authority has a comprehensive workforce development strategy. This supports the professional development of the social care workforce. It has assisted in creating a stable workforce with a wide range of experience who are sufficiently skilled in supporting children and their families.

The local authority has robust quality assurance arrangements which include partner agencies and councillors. The involvement of a range of partners and councillors is a strength, ensuring both responsibility for and awareness of the service delivery to vulnerable children. The practice reviews and multi-agency audits that are undertaken identify areas of good practice and development. However, the local authority cannot always be assured that actions from practice reviews and multi-agency audits are progressed. Feedback from children and families does not routinely inform the practice review and multi-agency audit process. The local authority acknowledges the importance of capturing the voice of children and families and their experiences of service delivery to inform service planning, and has early plans in place to develop this further.

The local authority collects and analyses a range of performance management data. The data is used effectively by the senior leadership team to continually inform, improve and develop services for children.

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

Yours sincerely

Nick Bennison
Her Majesty's Inspector