

26 May 2022

Jo Britton
Telford & Wrekin Council
Director of Children & Adult Services
Addenbrooke House
Ironmasters Way
Telford
TF3 4NT

Dear Ms Britton

Focused visit to Telford & Wrekin children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Telford & Wrekin children's services on 20 and 21 April 2022. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Rebecca Quested and Andrew Waugh.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need or subject to a protection plan.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers, calls with children and a meeting with a child protection chair. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.

Headline findings

Since the last standard inspection in January 2020, when the overall effectiveness of the service was judged to be outstanding, senior leaders have maintained a focus on keeping children safe and maintaining the quality of social work practice in Telford & Wrekin. As a result, children continue to benefit from an effective range of support and services, despite the challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Social work practice is making a positive difference to vulnerable children subject to child in need and child protection plans. Senior leaders continue to develop the service and have introduced a new social work practice model, although it is too soon to see the impact the implementation of this model has on outcomes for children.

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

- Consistency in the escalation into pre-proceedings of children who are experiencing chronic neglect.

Main findings

Effective partnership working in Telford & Wrekin has ensured that the most vulnerable children have benefited from support and protection during the COVID-19 pandemic. There has been increased pressure across the service over the last year, associated with a rise in referrals for domestic abuse and concerns for very young babies who were not previously known to children's social care. This has led to increased caseloads. Senior leaders are aware of this and have used an additional agency social work team to relieve the pressure.

Children in Telford & Wrekin are seen regularly by social workers who know them well. Most children benefit from thoughtful direct work which captures their wishes, feelings and experiences. Observations of family interactions are usually carefully considered and the impact of changing circumstances on children's emotional well-being is appropriately detailed in the child's record. Social workers ensure that all family members are included in developing effective safety plans. However, a small number of visits to children are adult-focused, which does not ensure that for these children a clear understanding of their experiences is obtained.

Most assessments are timely and well written, with clear evaluation of strengths and risk which leads to appropriate recommendations for next steps. Assessments are informed by effective information-gathering from partner agencies and comprehensive family histories. Social workers focus on how parents' behaviour and care impacts on children's well-being and development. Social work theory often informs effective analysis. As a result, assessments are holistic and provide a detailed understanding of the needs of children, including those with complex needs or disabilities.

Children receive a proportionate social work response to manage risk and meet their needs. Most plans reflect the voice of the child and capture their experiences. Both child in need and child protection plans are detailed and clear about what needs to change for risk to be reduced and for children's needs to be met. However, plans are rarely timebound, which does not ensure the effective monitoring of progress and hold parents or professionals to account. Senior leaders are aware of this and have recently introduced a new template to improve the clarity of plans in evaluating progress in meeting children's needs.

Most children benefit from regular reviews of their plans through child in need meetings and core groups. Partners consistently attend and contribute effectively to discussions about the child and progress of their plan. Child protection conference chairs offer appropriate scrutiny and challenge when children are subject to child protection plans, ensuring the consistent application of thresholds. Child protection conference chairs successfully balance the strengths and risks of parents' behaviour with a focus on what it means for children. Clear rationales are recorded of the joint decision-making of partner agencies and next steps. This ensures that most children receive the right level of social work intervention at the right time.

For those children living in crisis who are on the edge of care and those reunited with parents, there is an effective, well-coordinated multi-agency response. Innovative packages of wraparound intensive support ensure that children's needs are met and the risk of them becoming looked after are reduced. Families benefit from a wide variety of supportive services which are making a real difference to them, including the Family Solutions service, individual and family psychological input and focused interventions around exploitation. Consequently, there are positive outcomes for some of the most vulnerable children in Telford & Wrekin.

Most children's cases step up into pre-proceedings under the Public Law Outline at the right time for the child. However, for a significant proportion of children who are experiencing chronic neglect, concerns are not escalated into pre-proceedings in a timely way. These children experience repeated episodes of child protection and child in need planning over many years without sustained improvements in their care. This leads to delay for some children in securing safe and timely permanent care.

Once children are in pre-proceedings there is a clear rationale for critical decisions. Appropriate assessments are commissioned and a comprehensive range of support services are provided to avoid drift and delay for children. There is good consideration of early permanence planning for most children. Letters before proceedings are personalised and detail the local authority's worries and previous involvement. A separate assessment and support plan is also provided so that parents are clear what will be provided to support them to continue caring for their children. The effectiveness of social work practice is contributing to some children, where there is a reduction in risk, being able to remain in their family's care and to step down from the pre-proceedings process.

Despite the challenges of COVID-19, highly capable social workers keep children at the centre of their practice. Social workers spoke positively about how the formal and informal support they receive from their managers enables them to do this. They value the open ethos of the service which, as well as providing regular communication with staff, is receptive to their feedback. Social workers value regular supervision, although the quality of recording of this is inconsistent. Most records are reflective and clear about how each child's needs are impacted by social work intervention and strategies are developed to ensure the right support is in place. However, in weaker examples, supervision records contain a lot of text that is from previous records and unnecessary histories that are out of date and not relevant for current circumstances; this does not support the progress of children's plans. Social workers welcome the comprehensive training opportunities available to them, especially in relation to Telford & Wrekin's chosen practice model.

There continues to be significant financial investment in the children's social care workforce to increase capacity in response to increased demand. Despite the recruitment of an agency team of social workers in December 2021, the demands on the service remain high and caseloads have not reduced to the target set by senior leaders. Senior leaders are evaluating what further recruitment is required to ensure a more effective service to children through reducing caseloads.

There has been a change in several key members of the senior leadership team in the last year. However, this has not distracted from the continued focus on maintaining the quality of social work practice. Performance and quality assurance processes ensure that senior leaders can scrutinise practice effectively and focus their attention where it is most needed. Key themes are shared through regular staff briefings and additional training to ensure social work services for children continue to develop.

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

Yours sincerely

Rebecca Quested
Her Majesty's Inspector