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Dear Mr Samuels

Focused visit to Leicester children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Leicester children's services on 13 and 14 December 2022. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Rachel Griffiths and Victoria Horsefield.

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 looked at a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers, parents and carers. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.

Headline findings

Since the previous Inspecting Local Authority Childrens Services (ILACS) inspection in September 2021, when the overall effectiveness of the service was judged to be good, senior leaders have continued to scrutinise performance information and data. This, and increased quality assurance activity in the front door, has enabled leaders to monitor the quality and impact of practice during a challenging year, which has seen a growing population of children, and an increasing demand for services for children and families.

Leaders understand the service strengths in the front door, specifically: timely multi-agency responses to urgent safeguarding issues, the quality of assessments and initial plans, and the quality of direct work social workers undertake with children. Since the ILACS inspection, leaders have also appropriately identified areas of practice that require further development, which include: management oversight in the duty and advice service, the process of converting contacts into referrals, and the effectiveness of transition for children between children's social care and early help. Actions to address these weaknesses are under way, but are not yet evidencing impact. As a consequence, help and protection for some children is not provided at the earliest opportunity.

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

- The quality and effectiveness of management oversight in the duty and advice team.
- The quality and timeliness of decision-making for when a contact meets the threshold for a referral to ensure that information is gathered to inform next steps and prevent delays to assessment and allocation.
- The effectiveness of the interface between children's social care and early help to ensure that children are stepped up and stepped down at the right time.

Main findings

Experienced social workers in the duty and advice service (DAS) promptly consider contact information and have discussions with those making a referral. This ensures that the right information is considered to inform the next steps. The co-location of the DAS and the early help response team helps to ensure that families receive support proportionate to their level of need. Partners understand thresholds and the need to seek consent from families when appropriate.

In non-urgent situations, there is sometimes delay in contacts progressing to a referral. At times, this has resulted in a delay in children being seen by a social worker and the commencement of an assessment of their needs.

Managers in the DAS provide oversight and direction following the receipt of a contact. However, their rationale for next steps or why an alternative response would be more appropriate is not consistently explicit. For some children, insufficient consideration is given by managers to the need for a strategy meeting. As a result, a small number of children who should have been discussed at multi-agency strategy meetings were not. For these children, this meant help and protection were not provided at the earliest point.

Similarly, management oversight of repeat contacts in the DAS is not consistently robust. The rationale for why repeat contacts did not initially meet the threshold for a referral is sometimes lacking. This means children are not always responded to at the earliest opportunity to meet their needs and improve their circumstances.

When contacts do not identify immediate safeguarding concerns, but early help support is needed, the step down process to early help is not consistently smooth and timely. In one family's case, it took eight weeks before a family support worker was able to establish contact with the family in order to arrange a visit. Following delay, some parents retract their consent for the support that they initially agreed they wanted and needed. This creates the potential for further contacts and referrals as support needs remain unaddressed.

When early help is not improving children's experiences, children are appropriately stepped up to children's social care. This is not always done in a timely way. Consequently, a small minority of children have lived in uncertain and sometimes

neglectful circumstances for too long before an assessment of their need is undertaken by children's services.

When immediate safeguarding concerns are identified, children's cases promptly transfer to the single assessment teams. Prompt strategy discussions, followed by full strategy meetings evidence effective information-sharing to inform next steps. Most meetings are well attended by key professionals, and they lead to children being promptly seen to inform an assessment of risk.

When strategy meetings result in child protection investigations, appropriate enquiries are made with relevant professionals and family members. Older children's views are sought and are instrumental to decision-making. Decisions to progress to initial child protection conferences are appropriate.

Most assessments completed in the single assessment teams are thorough. They include consideration of past family history and harm, current strengths and areas of risk.

Effective relationship-building with children, and creative direct work undertaken with them, enables social workers to develop a good understanding of what life is like for children. Children's views contribute to their assessments and plans.

A collaborative approach to assessments and planning, which includes family network meetings and interim safety planning being undertaken directly with children and families, helps families understand the risks. The approach helps motivate families as they are working with a plan they have been involved in creating. This increases children's safety, pending the outcome of investigations and assessments. Parents spoken to during the visit confirmed that the input of social workers had improved their children's lives.

For some children, intervention from the early help response team and the multisystemic therapy team within the single assessment period allows preventative work to start more quickly and helps to prevent risk escalating.

Management oversight is evident at key decision points during the assessment and investigation process. Management oversight at the conclusion of assessments is appropriate, providing challenge for social workers where required.

Initial child in need and child protection plans that derive from investigations and assessments are appropriate. With a clear bottom line and trajectory of what needs

to be completed, by when, and by whom, parents have a better understanding of what needs to happen to improve their children's circumstances.

A wide range of audit and quality assurance activity provides senior leaders with an understanding of the quality of frontline practice. Audit activity is proportionate and purposeful.

Leaders use data, learning from audits, reviews of practice and feedback from families to inform themselves of where audit activity should be targeted. The learning from audits has led to changes in practice. For example, it has improved the quality of assessments and safety plans. This is an improvement from the previous ILACS inspection.

Despite recent challenges in some parts of children's services in respect of staffing capacity, workforce stability has largely been maintained within front door services. Despite being very busy, staff were unanimously positive about working in Leicester. They feel well supported and inspired by managers and leaders at every level. Staff take pride in their work. They are motivated, and like their leaders, staff are committed to improving the lives of children in Leicester.

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

Yours sincerely

Rachel Griffiths
His Majesty's Inspector