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Dear Ms Woodhouse

Focused visit to Bristol children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Bristol children's services on 18 and 19 February 2025. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Sophie Wales and Margaret Burke.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for the 'front door' services that receive contacts and referrals (single or multi-agency), and where decisions are made about child protection enquiries; decisions to step up or down from early help; and the local authority's response to children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless.

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

Headline findings

Since the last inspection in 2023, where the experiences and progress of children who need help and protection were judged as requires improvement to be good, determined leaders, including elected members, have shown energy and commitment to improving the response provided to children by frontline services. Important traction has been gained in most key areas that needed to improve. The stable and ambitious leadership team has positively strengthened workforce culture, and their relationship-based systemic model of practice. This has been warmly received by practitioners, who feel proud to work in Bristol. Importantly, leaders have brought the workforce with them on their improvement journey. Leaders have invited external challenge and scrutiny and demonstrate a readiness to learn and to continuously develop services and the responses provided to children.

While positive progress has been made for children who need immediate protection and those aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless, leaders recognise the need to

continue to improve the consistency of timeliness and quality of decision-making for all children at the front door.

Performance management and quality assurance processes are comprehensive and mature. Leaders are aware of the need to make more effective use of the suite of data within the front door to further drive progress.

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

- The timeliness and consistency with which initial decisions are made at the front door to ensure all children receive timely and proportionate support.
- The reliability and effectiveness of performance management and quality assurance arrangements of initial decision-making at the front door.

Main findings

When children are referred to children's services, information is gathered, and children are prioritised according to levels of need and risk. While many children receive a timely response, some contacts can take too long to be added to the system. Timescales set for actions are not always met. The overcomplication of some processes is contributing to this delay.

Children who require help and support from early help services are responded to appropriately and in a timely way. Decision-making is appropriate and work is passed seamlessly to services that can best support them.

When children who may need help and support from statutory services are referred to the front door, too many do not receive a sufficiently timely response. Practitioners are relentless in gathering information and contacting parents to gain consent. They endeavour to get alongside parents at this early stage, and to work with them. However, for many children, this process can take too long.

Children who are at immediate risk of harm receive the help and support they need quickly. Multi-agency child protection strategy meetings are held in a timely way. There is consistent attendance by police, health and education and often by the relevant professionals involved in the child's or family's life. Decisions and actions are proportionate to need and risk. The local authority and partners have strengthened practice in this area. Section 47 enquiries are equally timely and decisions for child protection investigations are proportionate and in children's best interests.

Management oversight is strong and provides guidance and direction to practitioners. Effective social work practice takes place in the assessment and safeguarding service. Consent to work with families is appropriately sought and, when this is dispensed with, this is recorded. Children and families understand why social workers are involved with them.

Children's wishes and feelings and views and opinions are routinely sought by practitioners as part of the follow-up work with children. Efforts are made to speak to even very young children in sensitive and thoughtful ways to understand their experiences. When gathered, it is evident that the voices of children are influencing and shaping the work going forward for them.

Visits to children are carefully recorded with a level of detail that shows practitioners have taken time to understand the issues and to work alongside families. Extended networks are explored, and non-resident parents are appropriately and sensitively engaged in assessments.

Clear and timely processes are in place when children aged 16 and 17 years present as homeless or at risk of homelessness. Leaders and managers have a clear line of sight to these children. Prompt and effective action ensures that children are provided with suitable accommodation when needed. Children have a good understanding of their rights and entitlements, which are discussed sensitively with them and revisited as needed.

Leaders have worked systematically on addressing the areas for improvement identified at the last ILACS inspection. Multi-agency partnership working has been strengthened, and the timeliness and consistency of child protection strategy meetings is much improved. Leaders have successfully worked with partners to strengthen the work of the multi-agency safeguarding hub, and there is now effective information-sharing between partners to help inform work with children and their families. They have responded robustly to improving the oversight and responsiveness to children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless, and this work now sits within the front door arrangements.

While positive progress has been made, more needs to be done to strengthen practice, and the analysis of performance information, around the timeliness and consistency of initial decision-making at the front door for some children.

Senior leaders and elected members actively oversee the performance and quality of children's services. The local authority quality assurance framework is comprehensive and mature. Learning from audits is used well to strengthen practice. The comprehensive suite of performance information is providing leaders and managers with oversight of almost all service areas, and insight into the progress and experiences of most children.

Senior leaders model a sincere and genuine approach to systemic practice across the service which is deeply embedded within the culture of the organisation. Practitioners speak about children and families with empathy and kindness and endeavour to work alongside them at all times. Leaders acknowledge that this approach should not impact on decision-making, and in making timely and authoritative decisions to help safeguard children.

Leaders have made significant progress in increasing staff retention and resilience, and practitioners report that a positive and refreshing approach is being taken by leaders through a series of recruitment initiatives.

Practitioners working in front door services are supported with their emotional well-being and receive helpful support for vicarious trauma. Their morale is high and their energy and commitment to making a difference to children's lives is palpable. Leaders have invested in additional staffing at the front door and practitioners and managers report manageable caseloads, and greater opportunities to reflect and learn.

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

Yours sincerely

Sophie Wales
His Majesty's Inspector