

Ofsted Focused Visit

Date: 15th September 2021

Report of: Director of Children and Families

Report to: Scrutiny Board (Children and Families)

Will the decision be open for call in?

Yes No

Does the report contain confidential or exempt information?

Yes No

What is this report about?

Including how it contributes to the city's and council's ambitions

- This report follows the recent two-day Ofsted Focused Visit to the Leeds Children and Families Front Door Service conducted on the 20th and 21st July 2021.
- The report and its proposals support the ambitions and priorities for the Children and Families Directorate, the Council and the city as a whole as set out in the Best Council Plan, the Children and Young People's Plan, Inclusive Growth Strategy and Health and Wellbeing Strategy.
- Ofsted inspectors identified a number of strengths in Social Work practice and Early Help in the Front Door Focused Visit, they highlighted three recommendations for practice improvement. Inspectors found no areas of serious weakness and no examples of children being left unsafe. The three recommendations for improved practice are:
 - The quality and consistency of assessments to ensure that key information and family history is gathered and analysed to inform decision-making, and the quality of children's plans.
 - The quality and impact of management oversight and supervision to ensure that decisions are timely and well recorded.
 - The quality and independence of audits to ensure that they provide learning to support improvement in social work practice and provide senior managers with an understanding of the quality of that practice.

Recommendations

- a) Scrutiny is asked to note the findings reported by Ofsted inspectors in the Leeds Front Door Focused Visit letter.
- b) Scrutiny is asked to note that the Children and Families directorate have developed an Improvement Action Plan in the light of the recommendations from the Focused Visit and that the plan will be monitored closely by the Children and Families Senior Leadership Team.
- c) Scrutiny is asked to consider its role in monitoring the progress of the recommendations made by Ofsted following the Focused Visit.

Why is the proposal being put forward?

1. This report is being put forward to inform scrutiny of the outcome of the recent two-day Ofsted Focused Visit to Leeds Children and Families Front Door conducted on the 20th and 21st July 2021.
2. The visit was carried out under section 136(2) of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 (EIA) as part of Ofsted's 'Inspecting Local Authority Children's Services' Framework (ILACS Framework).
3. The delivery model was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 context. Inspectors were on site and held face-to-face discussions with some local authority staff. Inspectors also used video calls for discussions with local authority staff, managers and leaders.
4. Ofsted two day Focused Visits evaluate an aspect of service, a theme or the experience of a cohort of children. Unlike a full standard or short Inspection of Children's Services Ofsted two day Focussed Visits do not result in a graded 'judgement' or full inspection report; rather inspectors report their findings about strengths and areas for improvement and outline these in a published letter.
5. If inspectors find serious weaknesses, they will identify areas for priority action. An area for priority action is either:
 - An area of serious weakness that is placing children at risk of inadequate protection and significant harm
 - An unnecessary delay in identifying permanent solutions for children in care that results in their welfare not being not being safeguarded and promoted.

Inspectors did not identify any priority areas in this Focused Visit.

6. The COVID-19 pandemic has continued to have a severe impact in Leeds and all aspects of children's services have, and continue to be, greatly affected. It has presented many challenges across the workforce and in the very diverse, densely populated parts of the City that include a high number of low-income and multi-generational households, pre-existing vulnerabilities have been exacerbated. The experience of grief and hardship caused by the pandemic has impacted greatly on local communities and the social care workforce, who have experienced stress, anxiety and loss. Despite this, Ofsted inspectors identified a number of strengths in Social Work practice and Early Help in the Front Door Focussed Visit. Leeds remains the only core city in the country to have achieved a 'Good' and subsequent 'Outstanding' Ofsted rating for Children's Services.
7. The strengths identified by inspectors included: timely and proportionate identification of risk and decision-making; assessments that demonstrated a focus on the child with effective information gathering that analysed the child's needs, strengths and risks; plans that were focused, with clear actions and timescales to measure the child's progress and all social workers receiving regular supervision and feeling well supported by managers and, despite an increase in demand over the last 12 months, no corresponding increase in average caseloads.
8. Inspectors noted that Staff are proud to work for Leeds, that there is a stable workforce, with good retention rates, that teams are well established, meaning that many children have a consistent social worker, which supports good relationships. They also identified

positive opportunities for career progression, with many staff choosing to remain in Leeds throughout their social work careers.

9. Inspectors highlighted the continued investment in early help services and the way that these services have adapted to meet changing and emerging demands during the pandemic, providing a timely and effective response and continuing to successfully divert children away from formal and more costly statutory interventions.
10. Inspectors found no areas of serious weakness but highlighted three areas for improved practice:
 - The quality and consistency of assessments to ensure that key information and family history is gathered and analysed to inform decision-making, and the quality of children's plans.
 - The quality and impact of management oversight and supervision to ensure that decisions are timely and well recorded.
 - The quality and independence of audits to ensure that they provide learning to support improvement in social work practice and provide senior managers with an understanding of the quality of that practice.
11. The Children and Families directorate fully accept the three recommendations set out by Ofsted; acutely aware that these are areas that require a relentless focus to achieve consistent high-quality practice given the size and scale of Leeds and in the context of the particular challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic.
12. Inspectors noted that where a child may be at risk of significant harm strategy meetings are taking place but that less than half of all strategy meetings are attended by the three key safeguarding partners (Leeds City Council, the NHS and West Yorkshire Police).
13. Covid-19 has had a significant impact on all agencies seeking to support Children and Families in Leeds. The three key statutory partners have acknowledged the associated organisational and whole system pressures and have taken immediate action to address any barriers to full attendance at strategy discussions. Statutory partners acknowledge that although information is provided to support decision making, ensuring that essential information from agencies is available to inform decision making and planning, the lack of attendance at meetings limits the contribution and involvement of agencies.
14. The Children and Families directorate have taken immediate steps to develop and implement a Focused Visit Improvement Action Plan to reflect and prioritise the recommendations from Ofsted.
15. The action plan includes a daily strategy discussion escalation process to ensure that any individual challenges are highlighted and addressed as a matter of urgency to enable attendance by all the three key partners. Additional resource has been identified to support full attendance by all three partners and multi-agency process mapping will take place during September to enable the strategic partnership to fully understand any ongoing barriers and to address these as a matter of priority.
16. The multi-agency weekly referral review meeting is monitoring the attendance and quality of strategy discussions and has noted improvements since the Focused Visit. Single agency and multi-agency performance management and quality assurance activity has been enhanced to provide additional scrutiny and progress and an action plan is in place

for the front door that includes a focus on timeliness and ensuring that all conversations are comprehensively recorded.

17. Learning for team managers is being updated around assessments, plans, recording of supervision, decision making and audit quality. Further comprehensive workforce development activity is also planned ensuring that social workers and managers are engaged in quality conversations about practice and how to reflect these in children's records.
18. Social work teams are now paired to establish cross team auditing with a clearer framework of moderation in place.

What impact will this proposal have?

Wards Affected: All

Have ward members been consulted? Yes No

What consultation and engagement has taken place?

19. The Children and Families directorate undertakes regular day to day consultation and more formal focussed consultation and engagement activity with a range of children, young people and families.
20. The directorate has an active Voice and Influence team who facilitate and enable the voice of children and families to shape and influence service delivery and development.
21. The directorate has developed a 'Let's Talk' programme that has enabled families with lived experience of the directorate and its services to shape and influence services in the here and now and in planning for the future.

What are the resource implications?

22. There are no resource implications, the Children and Families directorate will implement the Focused Visit Improvement Action Plan with its existing resource.

What are the legal implications?

23. The Children and Families Social Work Service has a range of statutory functions, the Improvement Action Plan will ensure that legal duties and responsibilities are fulfilled through the delivery of consistent high-quality child and family led practice and services.

What are the key risks and how are they being managed?

24. The key risk is inconsistency in practice and service delivery that may result in poorer outcomes for children and families. The directorate has developed an Improvement Action Plan to include the recommendations made by Ofsted in the Focussed Visit. Progress against the Improvement Action Plan will be closely monitored by the Children and Families Senior Leadership Team through its performance management and quality assurance framework and newly established Covid-19 Recovery Board.

Does this proposal support the council's 3 Key Pillars?

Inclusive Growth

Health and Wellbeing

Climate Emergency

25. This report and its proposals support the ambitions and priorities for the Children and Families Directorate, the Council and the city as a whole as set out in the Best Council Plan, the Children and Young People's Plan, Inclusive Growth Strategy, Health and Wellbeing Strategy, Climate Emergency and 'Thrive' Poverty Strategy.

Options, timescales and measuring success

a) What other options were considered?

26. The Children and Families Directorate have developed and implemented a Focused Visit Improvement Action Plan, this was felt to be the best option to address the recommendations from Ofsted, the plan will be monitored through directorate's existing performance management and quality assurance framework and newly established Recovery Board.

b) How will success be measured?

27. As above, progress against the Children and Families Focused Visit Action Plan will be monitored by the Senior Leadership Team through the directorate's existing performance management and quality assurance framework and the newly established Recovery Board.

c) What is the timetable for implementation?

28. The directorate has taken immediate steps to action the recommendations from Ofsted.

Appendices

29. Appendix 1. Leeds Front Door Focused Visit Letter August 2021.

Background papers

30. None.

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31 August 2021

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Dear Sal

Focused visit to Leeds children's services

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic.

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Leeds children's services on 20 and 21 July 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Victoria Horsefield and Matt Reed. Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for the front door, including decision-making for contacts and referrals, child protection enquiries, the decision to step down or step up from early help, and child in need assessments.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. However, the delivery model was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 context. The lead inspector and the director of children's services agreed arrangements to deliver this visit effectively while working within national and local guidelines for responding to COVID-19. Both inspectors were on site and held face-to-face discussions with some local authority staff. However, inspectors also used video calls for discussions with local authority staff, managers and leaders.

Headline findings

Leeds has experienced high rates of COVID 19 which has, and continues to have, an impact on all aspects of children's services. During the pandemic, senior leaders have continued to provide a wide range of early help services that have adapted well to meet the demands. Workers, despite the impact of COVID-19, report feeling well supported and proud to work for Leeds. However, the response to some children in need of help and protection is not as consistently strong as it was at the last inspection. When there is a clear identification of risk, children receive a timely and appropriate response. When a child's circumstances are more complex, and more information needs to be gathered to understand what is happening within a family, some children experience delay in their needs being identified and responded to.

When there are concerns that a child may be at risk of significant harm, less than half of the strategy discussions involve key partner agencies.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The quality and consistency of assessments to ensure that key information and family history is gathered and analysed to inform decision-making, and the quality of children's plans.
- The quality and impact of management oversight and supervision to ensure that decisions are timely and well recorded.
- The quality and independence of audits to ensure that they provide learning to support improvement in social work practice and provide senior managers with an understanding of the quality of that practice.

Main findings

Leeds has experienced high rates of COVID-19 with some areas of the city significantly exceeding national averages. Lockdown restrictions have been in place throughout the pandemic. Senior leaders understand very well the significant impact of COVID-19 for children and families, staff and communities and have a good understanding of the demographics of the areas most affected by the pandemic. The local authority and its partners responded quickly to identify those most affected and are working effectively together to deliver support. Statutory services have been maintained throughout and children have continued to be seen where it is safe to do so. Staff have felt well supported during the pandemic and have received practical and emotional support from senior leaders and managers.

The continued investment in early help services means that there are a wide range of effective early help services available to children and families. For some children, the early help service has successfully diverted them away from formal statutory interventions. Managers in early help have effective oversight and clearly record decisions when children's cases need to be stepped up or when interventions end.

Social work practice and management oversight at the front door is not as consistently strong as it was at the last inspection. A recent external peer review of the front door commissioned by the local authority identified areas of good practice, but also identified similar areas for development found in this focused visit. Senior leaders acknowledged these findings and are working to address shortfalls in practice quality and the timeliness of decision-making.

The front door experienced an increase in contacts during the pandemic, with many of these related to domestic abuse and parental conflict. The front door is well resourced with an experienced and stable workforce who report positively about the 'Leeds way of working'. For most children, timely and proportionate decision-making

leads to them receiving the right service when needed. Where there is a clear identification of risk, children's cases are transferred to the locality teams without delay. Parental consent is well understood and considered and, where necessary, dispensed with to allow further checks to be made. However, where an immediate child protection risk is not clear, decision-making is not always timely. For some children, there is a delay in them receiving the right level of intervention at the earliest opportunity.

Managers at the front door are not demonstrating that they have sufficient oversight of the progress and timeliness of children's cases. Managers do not consistently provide a recorded rationale where timescales for the progression of contacts and referrals are not met. In some instances, this is appropriate and allows further work to be undertaken. However, for some children, this leads to a delay in the analysis of risk and identification of the required intervention.

Many referrals and repeat referrals are due to domestic abuse. In some children's cases, there is not a robust understanding or analysis of the previous history and incidents. For some children, this means that the cumulative impact of domestic abuse is not being considered in the assessment of risk and decision-making. The local authority has recently introduced a daily multi-agency meeting to strengthen their response to domestic abuse. As this is a recent development, it was too soon to identify the impact of these arrangements.

Where there is a clear identification of risk, child protection enquiries are undertaken, and children are seen promptly. In these children's cases, managers consistently record decisions and provide a clear rationale for the next actions to take, including the decision to proceed or not to a child protection conference.

Strategy meetings are taking place. However, less than half of all strategy meetings are attended by the three key safeguarding partners. The lack of attendance, participation and contribution by the two other safeguarding partners, in addition to the attendance by the local authority, means that, for some children, the fullest information about their family circumstances is not being shared to understand risk and inform joint decision-making.

Children are being seen on their own by their social worker on a regular basis. This has continued throughout the pandemic, but there is variability in the quality of assessments being undertaken. Stronger assessments demonstrate a focus on the child with effective information gathering that analyses the child's needs, the strengths and the risks. Where practice is weaker, the assessment is overly descriptive, and the analysis does not clearly focus on the impact of the identified risks on the child.

The quality of children's plans reflects the variability seen in the assessments. The better plans are focused, with clear actions and timescales that measure the child's progress. The weaker plans are too generic and lack focus on the specific needs of

the child and their family. The plans lack clear timescales, making it difficult to monitor progress and assess whether the child's needs will be met by the planned interventions within a timescale that is right for them.

Children's case records evidence regular supervision and social workers reported feeling well supported by their managers. However, in some cases, supervision records were not reflective and were not assisting the worker to analyse their findings or provide an opportunity for learning.

Senior leaders have access to a range of performance data, and audit activity takes place. However, it was not clear to inspectors how this was providing leaders with sufficient understanding and oversight of the quality of practice and management oversight. Team managers audit their own team's work. The audits are not moderated and do not provide independent scrutiny of practice. Although the audit process includes consultation with children and families, this is not embedded in practice and had not taken place in any of the audits reviewed during the visit.

Audits do not routinely identify areas for development and do not provide sufficient evidence to inform workforce development and drive forward practice. While performance data is available and is enabling managers at all levels to have oversight of performance at a service, team and individual level, this management information is incomplete. It does not include all the performance information that managers need to understand the quality of practice and whether practice meets statutory requirements.

Despite an increase in demand over the last 12 months, there has not been a corresponding increase in average caseloads. However, there is variability, with some social workers holding higher than average caseloads. Social workers reported these to be manageable.

Staff are proud to work for Leeds and enthusiastic about the Leeds practice model. There is a stable workforce, with good retention rates. Teams are well established, meaning that many children have a consistent social worker, which supports good relationships. Staff reported positive opportunities for career progression, with many choosing to remain in Leeds throughout their social work careers.

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

Yours sincerely

Victoria Horsefield
Her Majesty's Inspector