

Children's Social Care Monitoring Visit March 2024

Report of Director of Children and Young People's Futures

Please note that the following recommendations are subject to consideration and determination by the Committee before taking effect.

1) Recommendation

That the Children's Scrutiny Committee be asked to:

- (a) note the contents of the Monitoring Visit report

2) Background / Introduction

This report provides an overview of the Monitoring Visit undertaken by Ofsted in March 2024. This was the 7th Monitoring Visit following the full Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) inspection in January 2020 where Devon's Children's Social Care was judged Inadequate. The focus of the Monitoring Visit was on Devon's Front Door (Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub) and the Early Help and Assessment and Intervention Service which receive referrals from the Front Door.

3) Main Body / Proposal

The 'Front Door' is the point of entry for all social care referrals, it is dependent on good partnership working and a clear understanding and application of safeguarding thresholds. The Front Door to Devon's children's services receives around 20,000 contacts each year resulting in around 5000 referrals into social care and has been a key focus for the children's leadership team since September 2023.

The Monitoring Visit took place on 5th and 6th March 2024. During the visit inspectors met with senior leaders and managers and practitioners working in Early Help, the Front Door and the Assessment and Intervention Service. They also met with colleagues from partner agencies who work in the Front Door.

The inspectors looked at the following areas of concern identified at the last inspection:

- Making sure that decisions taken by the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) are acted on.
- Professional curiosity and the quality of assessments.
- The quality of recorded management oversight and critical challenge.

These areas of practice were also assessed during a monitoring visit in March 2022, when inspectors found that children at risk of significant harm were not seen quickly enough, and many remained in unsafe circumstances for too long.

The inspectors found the following:

- Multiple changes to the corporate and departmental leadership team since the last full inspection in January 2020 have resulted in slow and inconsistent progress.
- In the summer of 2023, the new senior leadership team identified a significant number of children referred to the front door who had not had the risks they faced assessed for several weeks, leaving many vulnerable to further harm. The team's response has been effective, eradicating the waiting list with minimal delay in manager's decision making and establishing a permanent workforce in the MASH that is making better use of simpler, more effective processes.
- No decisions in the MASH that had left children at unassessed risk of significant harm.
- The relaunch and refresh of a consultation line staffed by social workers has been received positively by partner agencies and has reduced the time families wait for appropriate support.
- The option of targeted early help support for those children and families who may benefit from it is being considered in the Front Door. Improved decision-making about whether children need further social work assessment, or could be supported through early help, has reduced the number of families that need to be allocated to social work teams and consequently, caseloads are more manageable.
- Too many children were being subjected to child protection processes. This has reduced significantly over the last 6 months with evidence of more proportionate responses focused on working with families to enable positive changes to be made.
- When there are clear and significant risks to children, these are largely responded to quickly and effectively. Child protection strategy discussions are timely and include relevant professionals.
- The Emergency Duty Service provides an assured and sensitive response to crises.
- The quality of assessments and planning is inconsistent. Safety planning and actions to be taken following strategy discussions are often generic and do not focus on the individual needs of the child and their family.
- Too many children are not seen on their own during assessment and therefore the child's voice is absent.
- Children's records do not mirror the level of thoughtful reflection about practice and how the needs of children and their families can be met.

- The frequency of management oversight and supervision is improving however further work is required on clarity and purpose.
- Social workers' morale has improved and they feel increasingly confident in their managers guidance and direction.
- The current leadership team, including heads of service and service managers, has improved its line of sight by introducing manageable spans of responsibility, and staff report a more open culture that encourages them to raise concerns.
- Quality assurance has increased in quantity from a very low base but impact for children cannot yet be evidenced and further work is required at pace.
- Collaboration with statutory safeguarding partners at both a practice and strategic level requires further development.
- There is a lack of suitable support/services to refer to for children needing support with their mental health or waiting for assessments of neurodivergence
- Substantial improvements still need to be made to build on these foundations, but senior leaders have a credible plan in place which is focused on consistent adherence to basic standards of practice and has had an impact to date.

The full Monitoring Visit report can be found via the following link: [50243834 \(ofsted.gov.uk\)0243834 \(ofsted.gov.uk\)](https://www.ofsted.gov.uk/0243834)

4) Options / Alternatives

There are no options/alternatives to consider.

5) Consultations / Representations / Technical Data

Not applicable.

6) Strategic Plan

The Service Action Plan for the Front Door aligns with the vision in the Council's Strategic Plan 2021 – 2025 to be ambitious for children and young people in Devon.

7) Financial Considerations

This paper is for information only and there are no financial considerations.

8) Legal Considerations

This paper is for information only and there are no specific legal considerations.

9) Environmental Impact Considerations (Including Climate Change, Sustainability and Socio-economic)

This paper is for information only and there are no specific environmental considerations.

10) Equality Considerations

This paper is for information only so there are not any equality considerations. We will ensure we consider the Equality Act 2010 in practice developments at the Front Door.

11) Risk Management Considerations

This report is for information only and therefore there are no risk management considerations.

12) Summary / Conclusions / Reasons for Recommendations

There has been positive progress made at the Front Door and the inspectors recognised the hard work across the service however, there is much more to do to sustain the changes already achieved, continue to strengthen and develop practice and ensure the right systems and structures are in place to support this and improve outcomes for children in Devon. The service is working to an improvement plan which includes the recommendations made by Ofsted during the Monitoring Visit.

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Electoral Divisions: All

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