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Gerard Jones  
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Dear Mr Jones

### **Focused visit to Dudley Metropolitan Borough children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Dudley Metropolitan Borough children's services on 21 and 22 October 2025. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Nick Bennison and Michael Taylor.

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.

### **Headline findings**

Leaders have a strong understanding of the areas of strength, development and fragility within children's services and are committed to improving the quality of practice for vulnerable children. Leaders are providing stability and progressing towards strengthening the quality of social work across children's safeguarding teams. Children aged 16 and 17 who are homeless receive responsive and effective support. Most children who need help, support and protection receive a timely service commensurate with their level of need. Workers know children and their families well, and sensitive work is undertaken with children and families, particularly if children are at risk of harm or experiencing domestic abuse. Children who need help and support, however, experience assessment work that does not fully identify their needs and areas for support. This can lead to drift and delay for these children having their needs met. The supervision of social workers is too irregular and lacks reflection. This, alongside high caseloads for some social workers, impacts on the ability of the local authority to deliver consistently effective services to vulnerable children in this area.

## **What needs to improve in this area of social work practice**

- The quality of analysis within social work assessment work. (outcome 1, national framework)
- The regularity and quality of supervision of social workers. (enabler 2, national framework)
- The sufficiency of frontline workers across the safeguarding service. (enabler 2, national framework)

## **Main findings**

When children need early help (EH), EH workers undertake timely and sensitive work with children and their families to understand the child's world. This leads to clear plans of support for children that are reviewed through regular multi-agency meetings. When children's needs increase or decrease, most experience a smooth and timely transition from one service area to another. This means that children experience a responsive early help service that quickly meets their changing needs.

Many children experience a timely response from the front door. The recent increase in social workers in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) has enabled both workers and managers to respond promptly to contacts and referrals that are received. Workers within the MASH apply a strong analysis of historical information, which informs their decision-making. There is strong multi-agency communication to enhance MASH assessments and inform recommendations for next steps. This supports workers gaining a holistic initial understanding of children's needs to ensure children receive the service that will best help and support them.

Management oversight provides guidance and direction to practitioners in the MASH, ensuring that, for most children, they receive timely intervention at a level that meets their needs. Workers actively gain informed parental consent and are clear when they need to override their consent; this is all clearly recorded by workers and agency partners within the MASH. This means that children and their families understand why social workers are involved.

When children need further statutory help or support, many receive a timely response from the Family Safeguarding and the Adolescent Safeguarding Teams. There is expeditious management oversight that gives clear direction. Children receive a prompt initial response to their needs, with social workers quickly visiting and initiating assessments.

When children are at risk of harm, multi-agency meetings are organised in a timely way and are well attended. There is a comprehensive sharing of information by agencies about the child and a thorough discussion about the level of risk being experienced by the child. Decisions and prompt actions are proportionate to need and risk.

When children experience harm, social workers undertake detailed and sensitive assessments to understand the child's world and the level of risk within it. Social workers ensure that they gain the voice of the child and that they understand the level and impact of any harm for them. This means that for most children, the risk is responded to appropriately, leading to children receiving the right level of intervention and support in a timely way.

Children who need help and support, however, experience a variability in the quality of social work assessments. Most assessments gain an understanding of the child's needs and the family network. However, for too many assessments the analysis is superficial and does not focus on entrenched patterns of parental behaviour that impacts on the family's functioning. This leads to social work intervention that deals with immediate concerns rather than focusing on areas that need intensive and longer support. For children, this means that there is drift and delay in their needs being met.

Most children, when they need support out of hours, receive an effective response that ensures they are safeguarded. The recent increase in the staffing establishment of the Emergency Duty Team (EDT) has ensured that responses are timely. It also allows for a strong liaison between EDT and the daytime services that ensures for many children that they receive a smooth continuum of support. However, for some children who experience family breakdown, the response from EDT is not robust. This has led to some children being placed in unregistered settings for too long.

Children who are aged 16 or 17 and are homeless receive a timely, sensitive and effective response from both children and housing services in Dudley. They are informed about their rights and are offered advocacy and independent advice through the Youth Hub service within the Housing service. Children aged 16 and 17 are given suitable accommodation options to consider, including being looked after. Their consent, along with their parents' consent, is gained before alternative accommodation arrangements are made. Children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless in a crisis have a range of emergency accommodation within Dudley where they can live. This ensures that children aged 16 and 17 from Dudley remain in their locality, living in suitable, regulated accommodation.

Children and their families who are experiencing domestic abuse are well supported and assessed by both EH workers and social workers. Workers gain an understanding of the children's experience. Adults within the family home receive individualised work, which aids their understanding of the impact of domestic abuse on children. They are also provided with the tools to change behaviour and gain insight into relationship patterns that lead to domestic abuse. Workers gain a detailed understanding of the impact for the child and of the adult's ability to change risky patterns of behaviour. This ensures that for most children, workers respond proactively to reducing the impact of domestic abuse.

There is strong, cross-party, political and corporate support for Children's Services in Dudley, with ambition to improve and develop the service. Financial investment has supported Children's Services to progress from a period of challenge to one in which

the workforce is becoming more stable, and caseloads for some workers are beginning to become more manageable.

The senior leadership team is experienced and has created both short-term stability and direction for the staff group. The Self Evaluation Framework is an accurate appraisal of the recent pressures and the current areas of strength and development. Leaders are visible to the workforce and in a short period of time have developed a culture of openness and approachability. Social workers are now involved with service developments and have supported positive service changes. This has created a workforce that is engaged and involved in creating better services for vulnerable children in Dudley.

Supervision within the safeguarding teams, however, is irregular and does not allow workers to reflect on their practice. This is important for workers to aid their social work development, but particularly important to a service where most of the workforce is relatively inexperienced. The caseloads for workers across safeguarding teams are beginning to reduce but remain high. This hinders workers' ability to undertake quality work with children. Corporate and senior leaders are very aware of this pressure. There has been investment in staffing by the council and senior leaders have plans to further increase staffing levels to further reduce workloads.

The quality assurance process identifies key strengths and areas for development in social work practice. It does, however, focus on process rather than on the impact of the social work intervention on children's lives, and does not involve children, parents or social workers. This is a missed opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the quality of service being delivered to children. Involving social workers in a reflective discussion would support their learning and the future quality of their work.

The workforce in Dudley is positive about working in Dudley, and the support they receive from their colleagues, managers and senior leaders.

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

Yours sincerely

Nick Bennison  
**His Majesty's Inspector**