

13 June 2017

Julian Wooster
Director of Children's Services
Somerset County Council
County Hall
Taunton
TA1 4DY

Dear Mr Wooster

Monitoring visit of Somerset children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Somerset children's services that was conducted on 2 and 3 May 2017. The visit was the third monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in February 2015. The inspectors were Emmy Tomsett HMI and Joy Howick HMI.

This monitoring visit focused on how casework is progressed when it is transferred into the four children looked after teams. The visit assessed the quality of social work practice for children looked after.

The overall finding from this monitoring visit is that the local authority is only making adequate progress to improve services for its children and young people.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made by the local authority to care for children looked after.

Inspectors focused on the quality and timeliness for children coming into care, and considered the quality of assessments, planning for permanency, applications for court, placement stability, and management of children who go missing and are at risk of child sexual exploitation (CSE). In addition, inspectors assessed the quality and timeliness of supervision and management oversight of social work practice.

The visit considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, supervision records, routine management information reports provided to managers, the missing persons' protocol, observations of social workers, a team manager and an operational manager undertaking children in care duties, and other information provided by staff and managers.

Overview

Overall, the number of children looked after in Somerset is reducing across the four area-based children looked after teams. Decisions to look after children are mostly timely and robust. However, case records demonstrate a legacy of drift and delay experienced by children which are now being addressed. The quality of the earlier assessments by other professionals is variable. This means that, in some instances, risk-based assessments completed by children looked after teams are based on incomplete information and lack detail.

Statutory visits to children looked after are mostly timely, with 93% of visits currently within the required visiting frequency in Somerset of every six weeks or every three months. The target of 95% of statutory visits completed on time is not yet being met, but the detailed management data provided to all managers is supporting an overall improvement. In one area team visited by inspectors, data on current performance is on visual display for social workers. This shows how managers constructively share with social workers the results of their efforts and positively reinforce the importance of statutory visits to children.

The quality of the recording on statutory visits is variable, with some providing limited insight into the child's world. Where recording is better, there is clear evidence that social workers undertake enjoyable child-centred activities, spending time building a trusting relationship with the child or young person.

There is evidence on files of some direct work with children and young people, although this is not always well recorded and does not always feature in the statutory visit records in sufficient detail.

Children looked after reviews are mostly timely, with 98% of reviews within the planned timescale. Most reviews are well attended by key representatives from across the partnership. There is evidence of appropriate challenge by the independent reviewing officers and, in the cases seen, children and young people are supported by their social workers, advocates or their carers to attend their reviews. In one review seen, the social worker had not provided a report due to sickness absence.

The lack of a report from the social worker to the review means that key information is lost and effective reporting on the social worker's actions from the last review are not always clear, as they cannot be referenced effectively.

The quality of assessments in the four children looked after teams is variable. Inspectors found evidence of some good examples of sensitive, thoughtful work and robust analysis of risk, while others are limited and contain poor exploration of the key issues. This means that some plans do not address areas of risk and, in some

highly complex cases, work does not target the issues of concern or coordinate the efforts of agencies effectively.

The timeliness of completion of health assessments for those young people who have been in care for more than one year is currently below statistical neighbours. Work is in place to engage those young people who are reluctant to have these health assessments by using different approaches, led by the children looked after nurse. This is improving Somerset's performance, but the projected improvement is still below that of published statistical neighbours.

The mental health needs of some young people are not being effectively met. Inspectors saw cases of children with emotional and behavioral problems whose outcomes were negatively affected, because they were unable to access appropriate services to support their well-being. Some children are supported via their school's educational psychologist, but this support is not always timely. Further low-level support is offered via Team 8, but this means that children are not always receiving the appropriate level of support for their emotional and behavioral difficulties when they need it.

The quality of plans is variable. Some provide evidence of thoughtful and sensitive child-centred work, while others are out of date or do not address areas of identified risks. Actions are not progressed in a timely manner, because chronologies, assessments and plans are not consistently updated. This delay impacts negatively on the outcomes for children and young people. Inspectors saw evidence of team managers tackling this issue, in some instances through supervision, nonetheless team managers do not always ensure the timely completion of these documents.

The inclusion of the voice of the child in case records and plans is variable, so children's lived experience in their respective care setting is not fully recorded, hampering effective planning, reflective supervision and challenge.

Use of the Public Law Outline and permanency planning in court proceedings are mostly effective. There is clear evidence of positive and effective use of 'foster to adopt' placements in cases where it is appropriate to do so. For example, since 2015 there have been 30 'foster to adopt' placements, of which 12 have occurred since 2016.

Brothers and sisters are placed together where this is assessed as appropriate and in the best interests of the children. The viability assessments seen were proportionate and well balanced, with use of appropriate research in the report.

Response to CSE is not always robust. For example, immediate steps were not taken for a multi-agency plan to protect a young person where it would have been appropriate to do so.

Return home interviews are routinely offered to any children who have been missing. 53% of the children in care who went missing in 2016/17 had a successful return home interview. In the sample seen by inspectors none were seen to have been offered within 72 hours. Those cases seen where return home interviews were offered were up to seven days after the 'missing' event.

The quality of the case summaries is significantly improved in all cases seen by the inspectors. All are up to date, concise and provide a clear overview. In almost every case, the brief analysis of risk, where appropriate, is up to date. This supports good practice to prevent 'start again social work'. These case summaries are well embedded across the children looked after teams.

Children looked after are successfully encouraged to have advocates. Inspectors saw advocates being used effectively and imaginatively, particularly where large brother and sister groups are placed together. Individual children's needs were met, while the advocates who were provided improved their emotional support.

Support to children to enable them to return home to the care of their parents is inconsistent, and plans are not always sufficiently robust or reviewed effectively to ensure that the welfare of the child is monitored. This means that appropriate support services that would be effective in maximizing the positive outcomes for children and young people are not put in place.

For example, inspectors saw one instance of a CSE and 'missing' episode where social workers did not follow the local authority's own procedures, despite a parent reporting that they could not cope.

Long-term placement stability has fluctuated over the past year, but is showing overall improvement and is currently at 56%. Somerset has set a target for 70% of children to be in the same placement for at least two years. In order to reach this target, well-planned and flexible actions have been recently designed and are being built upon to drive the improvements. For example, effective and sustained scrutiny of children's placements by senior managers has resulted in improved stability for children.

Permanence for children in Somerset is now routinely considered as a viable and desirable option. Since April 2016, 49 children have been matched with permanent foster carers, 24 adoptions have been made, 16 children have been placed for adoption, but are not yet adopted, and 66 children have been placed with special guardians.

Caseloads are described by social workers as manageable, and those seen by the inspectors were at 15 or below.

Caseloads in the children with disabilities team averaged 15, however 2 workers had significantly higher caseloads with 24 children each.

This means that, where caseloads are at a lower level, case recording and practice are able to improve as social workers have time to complete tasks. The improvements, such as the case summaries, demonstrate the impact of lower caseloads, as this improvement was seen universally across all the looked after cases that were reviewed by the inspectors.

Social workers stated that they had ease of access to managers and mostly felt well supported. Supervision is taking place monthly. However, the quality of the supervision notes in the case files does not always support this. Some supervision notes are too brief and are little more than summaries followed by a list of tasks. There is evidence of good supervision notes with reflective analyses, quality assurance and a clear record of tracking the actions to ensure completion. However, the management oversight which is undertaken in addition to supervision notes is not sufficiently robust, frequent or purposeful, and this scrutiny does not routinely identify the delay experienced by the child or key weaknesses in practice.

Performance information is routinely used by managers. The standard weekly data set that is shared routinely with managers and staff does not currently capture performance reporting on missing children or the timeliness of health assessments, which are both areas with performance below statistical neighbours. However a monthly dashboard provided to these staff includes this information.

Almost 80% of children looked after are placed in good or better schools in Somerset, and this is well monitored by the virtual head to ensure that the children receive access to quality education provision. About 70% of children looked after in Somerset have 90% or better school attendance. However, the proportion of children who have been looked after for more than 12 months and who have been absent from school is high, at 6%, compared to statistical neighbours, at 4.5%.

Placement choice in Somerset is limited and the local authority continues to attempt to recruit additional foster carers, as well as specialist carers, in Somerset. Most children looked after are placed in foster care. Around 32% of children looked after are currently placed more than 20 miles from home and, while the local authority monitors this indicator effectively, this percentage is increasing monthly. There is a series of well-aligned support activities for foster carers, including a new buddying system and foster carer support line. Newly designed training is now available to build foster carers' resilience. This remains an area of ongoing activity and focus by the local authority, with closer working practices between the children looked after and the fostering management group. The aim is to improve the quality of care provided to children within foster care and reduce the number of foster placement breakdowns and placement moves for children, particularly as children move into adolescence.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Based on the evidence gathered during the visit, inspectors identified areas of strength and areas where improvement is taking place. Overall, the pace of change, while adequate, now needs to accelerate. The key challenge for Somerset is to align and implement key inter-agency processes to create effective working practices in relation to children who go missing and CSE procedures, to ensure that social work practice improvements in the children looked after service move beyond compliance and to maintain consistency across social work practice.

The increased stability of the frontline staff within the children looked after service has led to improvements. The local authority has made improvements in the use of management information provided to staff, in the reduction of caseloads in children looked after teams, to casework and to the focus on permanency planning for children.

While senior managers continue to drive overall improvement effectively, the impact of this focus is not yet resulting in consistently good-quality performance across all areas of the service. For example, placement choice remains limited, particularly for young people aged 13 and above, and too many are being placed out of area. Arrangements to identify and deliver support to young people who are identified as at risk of CSE are not always well coordinated or do not effectively protect young people. Return home interview timeliness and quality are not sufficiently robust or effective, and do not ensure that the outcomes for children are improving consistently.

The quality of assessments of children is variable, and weaker examples omit key information and do not explicitly reflect risk and protective factors. Assessments are therefore not contributing effectively to the development of robust care plans for children. Case records do not sufficiently reflect the voice of the child or their day-to-day experiences. Direct work with children is too variable in frequency and purpose, and does not ensure that children understand their journey into care or why they cannot live with their family.

The increased stability of the frontline staff within the looked after service has driven improvements, although this is not yet consistently evidenced across all services areas. Social workers in Somerset continue to report that they feel well supported by their managers and have adequate access to support and advice. However, managers need to improve the quality and detail of supervision notes and management oversight within the four looked after teams in order to make sustained improvements in practice, especially in complex cases.

Senior leaders are accurate in their assessment of key strengths and weaknesses across the service, and have responded by developing new operational procedures and better ways of working across the service. As a result, overall outcomes for children are improving, supported by the strategic improvement plan. Senior leaders

are highly aware of the wide range of the tasks ahead of them to improve services for children. They have a clear and ongoing comprehensive programme of actions to raise standards. The local authority is energetic in its approach, yet is realistic about the improvements that are still required to raise outcomes for children in Somerset.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Joy Howick

Her Majesty's Inspector