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22 February 2018

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Dear Catherine

Monitoring visit of Worcestershire children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Worcestershire children's services on 30 and 31 January 2018. The visit was the third monitoring visit since the local authority was judged to be inadequate in November 2016. The inspectors who conducted the visit were Jenny Turnross, Senior Her Majesty's Inspector, Andy Waugh, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Lee-Anne Farrach, Ofsted Inspector.

While services for children in Worcestershire continue to require much work to be of a good standard, progress has been made since the last monitoring visit.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the areas of help and protection, with a focus on the 'family front door'. Inspectors reviewed the local authority's response to referrals, the quality of assessments and planning for children, and this included evaluating the quality of management decision-making. The effectiveness of systems and processes that social workers, managers and senior managers use to oversee and track workflow arrangements were also considered. The visit also reviewed a small number of cases subject to pre-proceedings and care proceedings. This included the arrangements for managing the quality and timeliness of cases in public law outline. The progress of the local authority was reviewed against its improvement plan targets, with a particular focus on the impact of leaders and managers on practice, to assess the distance travelled.

A range of evidence was considered by inspectors, including electronic case records, supervision files and notes, observation of social workers and managers undertaking referral and assessment duties. Inspectors spoke to representatives of partner

agencies, senior leaders and managers, including the cabinet member responsible for children and families.

Overview

Elected members and senior leaders clearly articulate the improvements that must be made to ensure that children receive effective services. Significant financial investment means that senior leaders are able to implement change, from a very low base, where it is needed. Leaders recognise that a strong infrastructure needs to be in place to support effective social work practice and while practice overall needs to improve, positive progress is starting to be made. Investment in additional social workers is resulting in reduced caseloads for some, but not all, parts of the workforce, including newly qualified social workers. The local authority has also reviewed social work pay and conditions, which is resulting in a number of agency social workers securing permanent contracts with the council.

Inspectors saw a positive shift in the morale and culture of the workforce. Social workers are growing in confidence, and this is starting to result in creative, thoughtful and resourceful work with children. Children's case files demonstrate that an improved level of professional curiosity, including the identification and response to risk, is more evident in social workers' practice. This approach is supporting improvements in the consistency of practice and outcomes for children. In their discussions with inspectors, social workers are calm, measured and focused as they go about their day-to-day business.

Nevertheless, some children continue to experience too many changes in social workers and team managers. This has at times resulted in delays in case progression for a small number of children. The quality and consistency of management oversight and decision-making remain areas of improvement and the local authority has not yet achieved its ambition to reduce caseloads for all social workers.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Investment and clear priority setting by elected members and senior leaders is resulting in a stronger and sustainable infrastructure. Relevant performance management information is available to assist staff and managers to understand their day-to-day work, and this supports social workers to take a more proactive approach to their practice. The development of a performance framework is very positive. However, there is some further work to be undertaken so that the local authority can be assured that performance data is always accurate. Inspectors were impressed that a comprehensive system for managing work that is subject to the public law outline has been developed. This helps managers to track this important work, ensuring that timescales for court are adhered to, reducing drift and delay in case progression.

Inspectors identified some delays in securing appropriate legal advice when decisions to initiate court or legal processes are made. A more streamlined process would ensure a more timely response to children at risk of significant harm. The establishment of two case progression officers is strengthening the quality of court care planning. Social workers have received compliments from both the court and partners for the quality of their written evidence in court.

Partners reported to inspectors that the director of children's services and senior managers are acutely focused on delivering the required improvements to services for children. As a result, an understanding that all partners must contribute to the safeguarding and support of children has been reached. Strategic arrangements to deliver this multi-agency commitment in practice are already in place, although operational delivery remains a challenge. For example, partners are not yet fully integrated into frontline practice and governance arrangements at the 'family front door' do not yet ensure that all agencies fully contribute to the safeguarding of children.

The application of thresholds for intervention by children's social care and their partners has improved but remains inconsistent, and not all children receive a good enough service. Inspectors did not see any evidence of children suffering any adverse impact from this inconsistency. The implementation of a universal model of assessing risk to children has been welcomed across the partnership as the establishment of a corporate language that will be understood by all.

Team managers are not yet sufficiently proactive in making the right decisions for children in accordance with their levels of need. Although some evidence of improved decision-making was seen, some children's circumstances continue to be explored through social work assessments when a strategy discussion is the more appropriate forum. This is further evidenced by a significant reduction of 50% in the rate of strategy meetings from November 2017 to the end of January 2018. The time between strategy meetings and initial child protection conferences is too long and contributes to unnecessary delays to children's needs being fully considered by all relevant partners. The contribution to strategy meetings and child protection enquiries by partners remains too irregular and infrequent. This means that the authority cannot be assured that all children are receiving a comprehensive multi-agency consideration of their needs at the earliest opportunity when they may be at risk of significant harm.

Overall, audit activity undertaken by the local authority accurately reflects the quality of social work practice seen by inspectors. An effective whole-system approach to quality assurance has been developed. The local authority is using a number of platforms for assessing user experience, including an improved performance framework, quarterly audit cycle, learning from compliments and complaints and service user feedback. This diligent work is helping senior managers and leaders to

shape and develop improved services, and they now understand in far more detail the views of children and families.

Supervision of social workers by team managers continues to be process driven, not reflective and not always regular. The local authority is aware that this is an aspect of practice requiring improvement and has acted to reduce the number of social workers each manager is responsible for in an effort to improve the quality of their oversight. As yet, limited positive impact is evident, although social workers value supervision, say they receive it more frequently, and that they feel listened to. They would like more opportunities to focus on reflective practice.

Newly qualified social workers report that they are well supported in their first year in practice. However, some caseloads are too high, even when co-working arrangements are in place. A range of appropriate training and development opportunities are in place for social workers and managers, and this is starting to have the desired impact. The local authority has invested significantly in supporting social workers to understand the child's lived experience and, as a result, assessments and plans are demonstrating early signs of featuring the child's voice and their lived experience. Direct work and the identification of risk are more evident in children's case records and reduced caseloads enable social workers to spend more time getting to know and understand children. While there remain areas of improvement, this is an ongoing and positive trajectory for the quality of core social work practice.

I would like to thank you and your staff for your contribution to this monitoring visit.

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

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jenny Turnross".

Jenny Turnross
Senior Her Majesty's Inspector