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Dear Mr Spencer

Monitoring visit of Gloucestershire children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Gloucestershire children's services on 15 May 2018. The visit was the third monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in March 2017. The inspectors were Nicola Bennett and Kate Malleson, Her Majesty's Inspectors.

The local authority is making progress in improving services for children and young people. However, too many children continue to experience drift and delay in the assessment, planning and provision of services to meet their needs.

The director of children's services, together with the senior management team, is providing clear direction and embedding a programme for improvement, which has resulted in some recent demonstrable improvements in practice. There continues to be significant financial investment and additional resourcing by the council in children's services, and this investment is beginning to demonstrate improved service provision and outcomes for children.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the area of children in care, including:

- the quality of practice in delivering good outcomes for children in care in the 11–25 service
- the effectiveness of assessment, planning and interventions for children in care
- the application of thresholds, quality of decision-making and management oversight of children becoming looked after
- the quality of management oversight challenge and staff supervision in these services

- the accuracy and quality of the performance management information used by senior leaders and managers to oversee practice, and how effectively it is used to improve outcomes for children
- the quality assurance of social work practice through auditing of casework and the contribution it makes to practice improvement.

A range of evidence was considered during the visit, including electronic case records, supervision files and notes and information provided by staff and managers. In addition, we spoke to a range of staff, including managers, social workers, foster carers, young people and independent reviewing officers.

Overview

Inspectors saw improvements since the last monitoring visit, but the quality of practice continues to be variable. Children in care experience drift and delay, and a small but significant number remain in situations of unassessed risk for too long. A minority of children experience placement breakdown due to poor early planning and intervention. Too many children experience delays in achieving permanence, and in some cases this has impacted on placement stability and children's emotional well-being.

The local authority has developed its offer to attract and retain staff and has increased the number of management posts to support and more effectively supervise social workers. However, there continues to be a high vacancy rate and turnover of staff, which has a negative impact on progressing children's plans. The majority of social workers now have manageable caseloads. However, social workers do not always have the level of skills and experience required to recognise and provide effective interventions for children's complex needs. Managers' oversight of practice and staff supervision is regular. However, managers are not yet providing staff with sufficient challenge or direction, and too often fail to address deficits in practice, leading to continued drift and delay in progressing children's plans.

The quality of performance management information is comprehensive but not yet consistently accurate, for example data on the timeliness of health assessments. A regular cycle of casework auditing, and case tracking, is in place, which provides senior managers with insight into the quality of practice. Audits seen on this visit more accurately evaluated children's experiences, but escalating risk is not always identified and responded to with the urgency required.

The work environment for social workers has improved through the introduction of mobile technology. Workers are highly committed to children, and inspectors saw a number of examples of effective practice leading to improvements in children's circumstances and outcomes.

Findings and evaluation of progress

The quality of social work practice remains too variable. Inspectors saw some children whose needs were being addressed and whose outcomes were improving. However, in a number of cases escalating risk had neither been recognised nor had urgent action been taken to secure children's safety. Improvement is required to ensure that social workers are supported to identify and respond to all forms of exploitation.

The local authority recently established a process for managing children's entry into care. There is early evidence that this process is effective in supporting robust decision-making and the appropriate application of legal thresholds as well as increasing oversight and review by senior managers of children in care. A recent review of children subject to voluntary accommodation has led to appropriate action being taken for those children who were identified as requiring the local authority to exercise parental responsibility on their behalf. It is essential that the local authority continues to review children's circumstances on an ongoing basis to inform legal planning.

During this monitoring visit, inspectors saw a number of examples of social workers working tenaciously to secure the best outcomes for children, with positive results. Clear forward planning, engagement with professionals and effective coordination of services by social workers are making a difference for children. While this is positive, it is not consistent across the service. Not all social workers are clear about the outcomes required for children and there is a lack of focus on long-term planning for children, including post-18, to anticipate their needs and assist them to become successful adults.

The quality of assessments has improved overall, but assessments continue to be too variable and further improvements are necessary to ensure that children receive effective services within a timescale that is right for them. Assessments are not routinely updated when children's circumstances change and do not consistently reflect children's current needs and placements. A number of comprehensive assessments containing detailed analysis lead to effective planning, but weaker assessments are insufficiently analytical, and do not sufficiently identify risks and needs or consider history to inform future planning. Positively, children's views and experiences are increasingly being effectively captured and these are informing planning.

There is an urgent need to ensure rigour in the completion of risk assessments, particularly when accommodating children with highly complex needs and those who have been sexually abused, to avoid further trauma to them or other children in placement, and to ensure that their needs are fully understood and provided for.

The local authority has in place effective systems for monitoring performance in relation to missing children. Since the last monitoring visit, the number and timeliness of return home interviews completed for children in care has remained

constant, and approximately two thirds of interviews are completed within 72 hours. However, information gained from speaking to children is not being effectively utilised to understand patterns of behaviour or identify increasing risk over time. The interview template does not allow for an overall analysis or actions arising from interviews to be recorded, and this hampers effective planning and safeguarding for children who go missing.

There continue to be delays in the completion of plans for children in care, and plans do not always assist effective care planning and decision-making. Plans do not always flow from assessments or address identified needs, and actions to address risk are not routinely recorded. Although more recent plans contain timescales, this is neither consistent nor embedded. As a result, it is often difficult to measure whether an action has been achieved or has resulted in an improvement in children's circumstances. Contact arrangements are not routinely considered or formalised to support children to maintain or develop safe, enduring and positive relationships with significant family members.

Children's reviews are not effective in considering progress or implementing plans to reduce risk and address children's needs. Children's views and wishes are not always considered in reviews or planning, even where they are clearly articulated. Review minutes are often confused, with little evidence that significant health or risk issues have been discussed. While independent reviewing officers have identified delay and drift, they are not yet having a sufficient impact on practice to ensure these issues are effectively addressed. The local authority now needs to develop a detailed plan to enable the IRO service to deliver their essential functions, as set out in national guidance.

Social workers visit children regularly and children's views and experiences are now more clearly captured in visit records. Visits are not, however, always purposeful and there are rarely any resulting actions, even where significant events or disclosures have occurred. Direct work with children is not yet widely embedded. While in a small number of cases, children's diversity needs have been central to planning and intervention, further work is required to fully reflect and consider diversity issues for all children. Life-story work continues to be an area for improvement so that children are able to understand their history, families and the decision-making that led to them becoming looked after.

Management capacity has been increased and a programme to improve opportunities for reflective supervision and increase managers' understanding and oversight of performance information is in place. However, this is yet to have a visible impact on the quality of practice. Supervision continues to be largely action-centred, is rarely challenging and is not yet effectively driving forward and improving practice. Supervision records demonstrate that risk and permanence planning are not adequately explored and therefore supervision is ineffective in ensuring that timely and appropriate action is taken.

The local authority has refreshed its improvement plan and this is informing service development and priority areas for action. There is now a comprehensive range of

performance management information, which enables the senior leadership team to understand and monitor children's experiences. In addition, the establishment of regular performance surgeries with managers is leading to increased understanding and ownership of practice within teams. This has led to improvements in some areas of practice, for example visits to children. Managers are increasingly utilising performance information with their teams to monitor and improve social work practice. A training and development programme is in place to improve the skills and knowledge of social workers and managers in the assessment, planning and delivery of services for children. However, the majority of staff have yet to benefit from this programme. Senior leaders do not currently have comprehensive oversight of the development needs of their social care workforce.

There is now a good range of auditing activity being undertaken, which is providing the opportunity to understand performance and practice in specific areas, identify both strength and areas for improvement and take action to address practice shortfalls. While auditors are now more accurately identifying deficits in practice, including delay for children, the majority of resulting actions focus on ensuring compliance with processes rather than improving the child's experiences. Risk of harm has not always been identified or urgent action taken to secure the safety or welfare of children. Consequently, auditing of casework is not yet having an impact on practice improvement.

Since the last monitoring visit, there has been an improvement in staff morale. Social workers spoken to by inspectors were positive about the measures that have been introduced to improve their work environment and support the development of social work practice. Social workers reported that their caseloads are manageable, that they have good access to managers and felt supported by regular supervision and welcome the introduction of technology to allow flexibility in mobile working.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Nicola Bennett
Her Majesty's Inspector