

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231
Textphone 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/ofsted



3 September 2018

Ms Chris Sivers
Director of Children's Services Department
South Gloucestershire Council
PO Box 1953
Bristol
BS37 0DB

Dear Ms Sivers

Monitoring visit of South Gloucestershire local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to South Gloucestershire local authority children's services on 8 August 2018. The visit was the fourth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in February 2017. The inspectors were Joy Howick and Rachel Griffiths, Her Majesty's Inspectors.

Since the last monitoring visit, the local authority has continued into the second phase of its improvement plan. The scope and pace of improvement of services for children and young people in need of permanency in South Gloucestershire has been steady and realistic. This is despite the recent introduction of an electronic case work system in March 2018 and changes in the senior leadership team. However, the senior leadership team recognises that a number of areas continue to require improvement to ensure that children in need of permanency receive a good service.

Areas covered by the visit

During the visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made for children looked after, with a particular focus on:

- The effectiveness of permanency arrangements for children, other than through adoption.
- The quality and effectiveness of care plans and reviewing processes for children looked after.
- The quality and effectiveness of the oversight of practice by independent reviewing officers (IROs) and social work team managers for children looked after.

- The frequency and quality of visits by social workers to see children looked after.
- The quality of management oversight, challenge and staff supervision in these services.

A range of evidence was considered during the visit, including electronic case records, supervision files and notes, observation of social workers and senior practitioners and other information provided by staff and managers. In addition, we spoke to a range of staff, including managers and social workers.

Overview

Senior leaders have maintained a consistent focus on improving outcomes for children in the areas considered during the visit. Permanency planning, including the use and support of special guardianship arrangements, is well established. Delegated authority for carers, which had previously been an area of weakness, is also now well established. Social workers now have manageable caseloads. This is enabling them to spend more time with children and, increasingly, to undertake effective direct work to improve children's outcomes. However, the quality of assessments and plans is still too variable and direct work is not consistently provided for all children when they need it.

Team managers' supervision of social workers, while now regular, is rarely challenging or reflective and does not support improvements in practice. There has also been insufficient progress made in developing the role of IROs in challenging and scrutinising practice in order to improve outcomes for children looked after. Conversely, the local authority has made considerable progress since the last monitoring visit in the effective use of auditing activity to identify and address practice shortfalls. While there are current and planned actions to address deficits in the oversight of practice by IROs and team managers, the local authority is currently over-reliant on findings from auditing activity to improve practice standards. However, no practice of an inadequate standard was seen during this visit.

The findings in this visit demonstrate that senior leaders know their areas of strength. They also know what they need to do to improve social work practice in order to reach a consistently good standard over all. Senior managers continue to manage the challenges created by the new electronic casework system. However, a considerable amount of time and resources of the frontline workers is required to ensure that management information is accurate. This needs urgent resolution in order to facilitate the necessary improvements in practice.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Based on the evidence gathered during the visit, inspectors identified areas of strength, areas where improvement is occurring, and some areas where the progress has not met the expectations set out in the local authority's action plan.

A well-established cycle of audit activity shows an improved level of insight and scrutiny since the last monitoring visit. The audits now provide a good sense of the child's lived experience. They are consistently accurate in their analysis of social workers' practice. The auditors now always involve the social worker, and audits are comprehensive. This includes feedback from parents and other professionals. This has positively impacted on social work practice, and feedback from auditing activity has resulted in actions that improve outcomes for individual children. Social workers shared their positive learning experiences with inspectors. They explained how they value the opportunity to reflect and apply lessons learned to their overall practice. While the majority of work requires improvement, inspectors found some examples of good and very good work that is enhancing children's life experiences.

However, the majority of audits failed to identify deficits in the quality of supervision of social workers. Supervision is mostly timely, but its quality needs to improve. Managers set a list of tasks to complete, but the completion is not recorded in the subsequent record of supervision. Overall, supervision records lack analysis; they are simply a statement of fact and/or a description of events. They do not consistently include timescales for actions or contingency plans and do not identify deficits or address areas for improvement.

The IRO role in scrutiny and challenge continues to be an area for development. The escalation process is insufficiently used and when used is not effective in leading to practice improvement. IROs and social workers do not write review minutes and care plans in child-friendly language. Children cannot easily understand their plans and therefore cannot have a sense of control over their lives. In the recent, excellent 'Promise Survey', children stated that they wanted their voices better captured in their reviews and that they wanted better involvement in their planning. Positively, senior leaders are using the recommendations directly from the survey to shape the new corporate parenting strategy.

Since the last Single Inspection Framework (SIF) inspection in 2016, permanence for children has been achieved more promptly. Senior leaders have recently completed a much needed 'catch-up' exercise to match all children permanently with their long-term foster carers. This has given these children a greater sense of stability and security. The newly implemented permanency planning meetings serve as an effective tool to help ensure that children's futures are resolved without delay. These meetings evidence effective parallel planning; they consider the full range of permanency options and contingency plans. These well-chaired and recorded meetings provide social workers with timescales for actions to ensure that tasks are completed which move plans forward without delay.

Placement stability continues to be a strength. Low numbers of children have had three or more placement moves. For those few who have had three or more moves, the reasons are appropriate and purposeful. A high number of children remain in their same placement for over two years. The fostering strategy demonstrates a commitment and realistic plans to increase capacity and placement choice in order to maintain the good level of stability for children. Inspectors saw some positive outcomes for long-term fostered children with highly committed carers and social workers.

Effective use of special guardianship orders has enabled children to remain in a family environment that is familiar to them and that meets their needs. In the last three years, there have been no breakdowns in these care arrangements, which highlights the effectiveness of special guardianship support plans. Senior managers' plans to expand the service for special guardians are insightful and forward thinking, given the increasing numbers of children living in such arrangements.

Social workers see children regularly and know them well. Social workers are consistent and important people in their lives. Inspectors saw some good direct work and life-story work, which were helping children to understand the reasons why they are not living with their parents. However, while there has been an increase in capacity through the appointment of a therapeutic life-story worker, this is too recent to ensure that all children who need life-story work receive it at a time that is right for them.

All children have assessments that inform their plans. This is an improvement since the last inspection in 2016. Assessments are, however, still variable in quality. The poorer assessments don't contain all professionals' views, which means that they can't be used to inform the analysis and to plan. The child's voice is not consistently strong. There is a tendency to respond to events in children's day-to-day lives rather than to consider holistically their overall needs. Better assessments have a thorough analysis of children's individual needs in order to inform plans. Not all care plans are sufficiently specific to show what action needs to be taken, nor do they include clear contingency plans for children placed in long-term foster care or residential homes.

The new electronic system that links the recording of assessments, review minutes and care plans creates difficulties for social workers in updating plans after reviews. Care plans are much better to read on-screen than the printed version that children and parents receive. Printed care plans are difficult for children, families and carers to understand what actions need to be taken and why. Actions currently being taken by senior leaders aim to alleviate these difficulties

Senior leaders have successfully addressed the failure, identified at the last inspection in 2016, to ensure that carers are provided with delegated authority. Children now have their delegated authority agreements in place. Carers can now

make day-to-day decisions with confidence and authority so that children in their care can live as normal a family life as possible.

The quality of case recording by social workers and managers is still too variable. Inspectors found some good recording, which gave a good sense of the child's lived experience. However, too many records fail to capture important events and the outcomes of incidents. As a result, children reading their records in the future may struggle to understand aspects of their time in care and the rationale for the decisions made on their behalf.

Social workers like working in South Gloucestershire and report that reduced caseloads have been pivotal in improving their social work practice with children. Senior leaders know their areas of strength, the areas where improvements are still inconsistent and the areas that require further development.

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