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Chief Executive & Corporate Resources Department
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Dear Ms Sivers

Monitoring visit of South Gloucestershire children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to South Gloucestershire children's services on 10 January 2019. The visit was the sixth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in February 2017. The inspectors were Joy Howick and Rachel Griffiths, Her Majesty's Inspectors.

South Gloucestershire Council continues to make increasingly secure progress in improving services for children in need of help and protection and for those receiving support from the disability services

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed progress made in the area of help and protection, including:

- the quality and timeliness of information-gathering and decision-making in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH)
- the quality of management decision-making in the access and response teams and the application of thresholds for statutory intervention, including cases transferred to the 0–25 disability service
- the effectiveness of assessment and planning for children in need of help and protection, including disabled children, children who go missing from home and children at risk of sexual exploitation
- the quality of management oversight, challenge and staff supervision in these services.

Inspectors considered different types of evidence during the inspection, including electronic case records, supervision files and notes, observation of social workers and senior practitioners undertaking referral and assessment duties, and other information provided by staff and managers. In addition, we spoke to a range of staff members, including managers, social workers and administrative staff.

Overview

Senior managers have addressed the weaknesses in the access and referral teams identified at the first monitoring visit of 19 and 20 September 2017. Inspectors noted continual improvement in the quality of services for children in the 0–25 disability services. Despite challenges, the quality of service that children in need of help and protection receive from the access and response teams has also improved. Better recognition of potential risk and more timely responses in this team have resulted in children receiving responses appropriate to their needs. The pace of improvement has increased. Senior managers are aware of the strengths of their services as well as of areas that continue to need further development.

Senior managers recognised persistent difficulties with the functioning of the MASH due to the sporadic attendance of partner agencies and challenges in relation to resources. As a result, they have successfully negotiated new working partnership arrangements which are due to be relaunched in February 2019. In the interim, senior managers and staff in the access and response teams have worked hard to prevent delays in responding to contacts and in visiting children to assess their needs. As a consequence, children are no longer left in situations of unknown risk and are receiving timely responses, which helps keep them safe. Problems with the electronic support systems seen at the first monitoring visit have been resolved, resulting in more effective functioning in the access and response teams.

In the access and response teams, the appointment of permanent team managers has created a more stable environment for social workers and has enabled children to develop sustained relationships with their social workers. The caseloads of social workers in these teams have reduced considerably in recent months. As a result, the quality of social work practice is improving as social workers have more time to complete direct work with children and families.

The improvements identified at the first monitoring visit in the 0–25 Disability Service, for example the quality and timeliness of home visits and child in need reviews, have been sustained and embedded. The service continues to be well managed and social workers' caseloads continue to be manageable. The senior leadership team and the team manager have a strong focus on further developing this already improved service.

The local authority continues to have a comprehensive and well-embedded quality assurance framework. Auditing of casework is a strength and when areas of weaker practice are identified, managers take action swiftly in order to rectify deficits in practice and to ensure that outcomes for children improve.

The senior leadership team has made good use of the support and challenge from their partners in practice and their Department for Education adviser. This has further facilitated steady improvement for services for children.

Findings and evaluation of progress

The local authority and partner agencies' work has now resulted in some improvement in multi-agency information-sharing when children are first identified as being in need of help. However, some partners only provide partial information about a child, which does not facilitate effective decision-making. Seeking further information required to inform decision-making is an additional burden for social workers. Senior leaders are addressing this issue with partners, overseen by the South Gloucestershire Safeguarding Children Board.

The access and response teams are now delivering a timely and effective service for children. Thresholds continue to be consistently applied and key actions are progressed quickly for the overwhelming majority of children who require help and support. This is an improvement since the first monitoring visit.

Strategy discussions undertaken in the access and response teams include all relevant partner agencies. They are well recorded. There is clear evidence of how the multi-agency group of professionals reaches appropriate decisions to safeguard all children. The previous concern regarding delays in strategy meetings taking place is no longer evident. As a result, no children considered in strategy meetings were seen to have been left in situations of unassessed risk.

Children subject to an assessment in the access and response teams are seen promptly and at an appropriate frequency. Social workers undertake and record their direct work to capture the views of children and they use this information to inform the assessment of each individual child's needs. This is an improvement in social work practice since the first monitoring visit. Social workers quickly build a rapport with children. Consequently, children are happy to talk about themselves and their feelings to their social workers. This adds a layer of protection for children in need of help and support.

Overall, the quality of assessments and plans has improved, but they are not yet consistently good. Managers recognise this and are taking action to address the inconsistencies that remain. Social workers mostly use family history to inform their analysis, but gaps remain. For example, input from partner professionals and significant family members are not always used to inform the assessment. As a result, social workers do not always have a holistic picture of the child's experiences, and this can hinder the quality of planning. A small number of plans lack timescales and contingency planning, making it difficult to hold families and agencies to account.

Where statutory intervention is no longer required but preventive services would assist children and families to improve their situation, there is sometimes a delay in these services starting. Senior leaders have recognised this shortfall and are taking

action to improve the 'step-down' process so it is both timely and streamlined for the benefit of children and families. The referrals seen for preventative services and the subsequent preventative plans were detailed and clear about what needed to improve. Once the intervention does start, children and families receive appropriate help, which supports them effectively.

Management direction and oversight are improving, and social workers are positive about the levels of support and direction they receive from their line managers. However, management oversight is not consistently evident in all children's case records. A very small minority of children's records lack clear actions and do not include timescales or follow-up by the manager to ensure that children's cases are progressing. The implementation of recent 'mapping' work at the start of assessments is helping social workers to focus on their plan of work with families. Senior leaders have plans in place to embed this good practice across the rest of children services.

When children are identified as being at potential risk of sexual exploitation, involvement in gangs or county lines, social workers undertake comprehensive risk assessments. Assessments inform safety planning and recognise children as victims. This is an improvement since the first monitoring visit. A range of appropriate support services provided to children and their families is helping to reduce risk and improve the outcomes for vulnerable children.

Managers have improved the timeliness and take-up of return home interviews for children who are reluctant to engage with services, and they are close to achieving the targets they have set. The quality of information provided in the return home interviews has improved. There is sufficient analysis of the push-pull factors, resulting in plans that are helping to reduce incidents of children running away.

In the 0–25 disability service, a social worker continues to effectively manage 'open to review' cases of children who are considered to have low levels of need. This improvement, made since the last inspection, has been sustained. A recent audit exercise by senior leaders identifies some good outcomes for disabled children. It also identified learning to further improve the quality of practice with children receiving services on an 'open to review' basis.

All staff across both the access and response teams and the 0–25 disability service engage in a variety of appropriate training courses. Although there remain high levels of agency staff in the access and response teams, the majority are long-standing, resulting in more stability across these teams. Agency staff commented on the prompt access to the relevant training which helps them to adapt to working in South Gloucestershire. Training opportunities are now well established and continue to support senior managers' abilities to improve the quality of social work practice. Staff are confident and positive about working for South Gloucestershire and morale is good.

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