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Mr Chris Spencer
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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 18 February 2020. The visit was the eighth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in March 2017. The visit was carried out by Joy Howick and Nigel Parkes, Her Majesty's Inspectors.

Although this visit highlighted improvements in some aspects of the services provided to children, the local authority is taking too long to address critical weaknesses that were identified at the inspection in March 2017. Improvements in some parts of the service, where leaders have provided focused attention, are showing early signs of success. This is more evident in the safeguarding teams than in other parts of the service. However, the quality of support provided to children in need of help and protection remains inconsistent. This means that not all children get the help and support they need promptly.

Areas covered by the visit

During this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the area(s) of:

- the timeliness of social work visits to see children
- the effectiveness of assessment, planning and interventions for children in need of help and protection, including disabled children
- the quality of management oversight, challenge and staff supervision in these services
- the accuracy and quality of performance management information used by senior managers to oversee practice, and how effectively it is used to improve outcomes for children.

Overview

The senior leadership team demonstrates that it is determined to improve services for children. However, it has been two years since the previous inspection, which found services to be inadequate, and it is taking too long to address the critical weaknesses. Where changes have been made, they are very recent, and improved areas remain fragile. Senior leaders and managers have recognised the need to re-focus their attention. They have taken appropriate steps to ensure that they have a full understanding of the issues in the quality of current practice, but this has not led to sufficient direct improvements.

The quality of intervention provided to children is too inconsistent. Managers are not always effective in responding to shortfalls in practice, or in acting to prevent children's situations from worsening. The timeliness of visits to children has improved, but there is still much work to do to ensure that visits are purposeful and give workers a sense of the child's experiences. Consequently, not all children get the help they need at the earliest point, and some are left in situations of risk for too long.

Senior leaders and managers have focused time and resources on creating a better environment, where children can receive an improved service, and with fewer changes of social workers. They have had some success in stabilising the workforce and in maintaining social work caseloads at a manageable level. However, the impact of this on social work practice, and, ultimately, on the experiences of children in Gloucestershire, is not yet consistently evident.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Senior managers and leaders know their strengths and areas for improvement in respect of services for children in need of help and protection. The local authority's improvement programme sets appropriate priorities and actions. However, there are not yet enough required improvements being made to practice, and what improvements are being made are not consistent.

Senior leaders and managers use multi-layered performance management information to carefully track the quality of services and the impact they have on children. Recent improvements have supported a clearer insight on frontline practice. However, this is not addressing all deficits in practice, and some children are not getting timely help at the earliest point.

Social workers and managers do not consistently meet expected social work practice standards for all children. For example, not all visits to children are purposeful, and children's records do not consistently reflect their lived experiences. Some process issues have improved, particularly social workers ensuring that they make timely visits to children.

The overall quality of assessments remains too variable. Some assessments aren't clear about purpose and objectives. While there has been some progress made in

ensuring that assessments are timely for children, these do not always adequately address the impact of parents' behaviour. For example, social workers focus too heavily on the needs of the adults in the family, rather than on the child's lived experience. As a result, children's needs are not always being clearly articulated, and subsequent plans are poor. Where assessments are stronger, they are appropriately detailed, child-centred and evidence some effective use of the new social work tools, such as the neglect guidance and Essential 2.

Thresholds are appropriately applied by social workers and managers, in relation to cases being stepped up or down to child protection or escalated to care proceedings. Strategy meetings and child protection enquires are increasingly effective, and most are timely. However, some children wait too long for an initial child protection conference. This delay is a decline in performance. Children do receive a service during this period of delay to safeguard them. However, they do not have the benefit of a child protection plan at the earliest point.

Children's views are not yet consistently represented in child protection conference minutes. At reviews, child protection chairs do not adequately address or effectively escalate a lack of progress in some children's plans. The quality of plans remains variable. Some are detailed and include appropriate actions that address identified needs. However, some do not include dates for key actions to be completed by, and include jargonistic language that is not easy for other professionals or families to understand. Contingencies are not routinely considered. This makes it difficult to track children's progress, leading to drift and delay in helping children's circumstances to improve at the pace needed.

Overall, the quality of practice for disabled children has declined since the last inspection. This team is currently under pressure due to the recent high turnover of staff, including managers, leading to too many changes of social workers. Children's plans do not address children's needs effectively. Management oversight does not challenge poor practice, such as the lack of improvement being made to children's circumstances or the delay in the interventions provided to support families. The impact on brothers and sisters of living with a disabled child is not always fully considered, and therefore is not addressed within planning. Transition planning for children with disabilities starts too late, creating uncertainty for all involved.

Improvements in some parts of the service, where leaders have provided focused attention, are showing early signs of success. This is more evident in the safeguarding teams than in other parts of the service. In these teams, social workers visit children more regularly and demonstrate persistence and professional curiosity in their practice. In addition, planning for children in these teams is improving, and there are some more recent plans that are of a better quality. Further work is required to ensure that plans identify desired outcomes, that timescales and responsibilities for actions and objectives are measurable, and that all children have an up-to-date plan. Nevertheless, too much variability is still evident across the service.

Supervision is still not of sufficient quality and lacks critical challenge and reflection to support good practice. As a consequence, management oversight and supervision are not effective in ensuring that children's circumstances improve within reasonable timescales.

The local authority has continued to make progress in recruiting and retaining a permanent workforce. Staff turnover continues to reduce. As a result, there has been a decline in the number of children who experience a change of social worker, but this is still a feature in too many children's lives. This has led to drift and delay in progressing some children's plans. Consequently, children's circumstances do not always improve quickly enough.

Both the vacancy numbers and rates have significantly reduced over the past 12 months. However, the number of vacancies across the service has increased due to the creation of new posts to provide additional capacity. This has resulted in the continuing use of a high proportion of agency social workers, at 32%, which means that the workforce remains fragile.

Social workers have more manageable caseloads, and the morale in the teams is improving. Staff feel well supported by visible and approachable leaders and managers. Staff value the opportunities they have for their professional development from Gloucestershire children's services. The assessed and supported year in employment programme provides a series of well-trained and motivated professionals, who are carefully supported into their first year of social work. The local authority has invested in this programme as a key strand of their work to strengthen recruitment and retention going forward.

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