

30 January 2023

Lisa Bursill
Director of Children's Services (interim)
Devon County Council
County Hall
Topsham Road
Exeter
EX2 4OD

Dear Lisa

Monitoring visit to Devon children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Devon children's services on 6 and 7 December 2022. This was the fourth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in January 2020. His Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Steve Lowe and Tracey Ledger.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the quality and impact of services for children in care, including disabled children. Inspectors had a particular focus on the following areas of concern identified at the last inspection:

- Permanence planning for children.
- The experiences and progress of children living in unregulated and/or unregistered provision.
- The experiences and progress of disabled children in care.
- Strategic oversight and grip on areas for improvement and oversight by senior leaders, including of case audits and supervision.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

Headline findings

Devon County Council's leaders have not ensured that all children who come into their care know early enough what the permanent and secure arrangements are for their lives. There has not been enough progress for children in this area of practice since the full inspection three years ago. Children who go to live with family members or friends often do so without the necessary rigorous and comprehensive assessments or the resultant packages of support and oversight that these would identify. Similarly, for those children for whom such arrangements are working well, there are delays in securing legal, permanent arrangements for them through special

guardianship orders (SGOs) or other legal routes. Although the number is reducing and scrutiny is much improved, there are children living in children's homes that should be registered with Ofsted but are not. Quality assurance through the auditing of social work practice remains weak, lacking the quality and clarity required to drive the significant changes required in Devon. The quality of social work practice, including frontline management decisions, remains highly variable across teams and localities. Examples of stronger, child-focused practice are outnumbered by those where children experience changes of social worker and delay.

The children's services senior leadership team, as well as the chief executive, will all have changed by February 2023. This significant change is unsettling for staff and has the potential to slow down the pace of change.

The local authority's reliance on temporary and agency staff is decreasing, caseloads are becoming more manageable and key management positions throughout much of the organisation have now been filled by permanent staff. But this has not yet translated into discernible and sustained change for children.

In terms of maintaining any level of continuity, middle and frontline managers do have energy and a strong commitment to implementing the improvement plan. Children are actively involved in shaping the service and holding corporate parents to account and social workers are increasingly choosing to stay working in Devon.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Children wait too long for decisions to be made that ensure they have permanent homes. Management decisions, including those of the independent reviewing officers (IROs), do not sufficiently focus social workers on the need for permanence for children, or why this is important. Recently introduced permanence panels have created a structure for more timely discussions about where children are going to live but are not consistently making a difference to what happens.

The tracking of permanence is disjointed across the different localities in Devon and centralised reporting lacks the sharpness necessary for analysing the detailed plans or options that have been agreed for children. For over 100 children, their plan is recorded as 'other' and neither team managers nor more senior managers understand the current arrangements for these children. It is clear that some children live in arrangements where more permanent options, such as SGOs, could be pursued with family members but are not. Consequently, these children are left in situations where they are unclear about the legal, emotional and financial certainty that clearer decision-making could bring. It is difficult to know precisely how many children this affects due to the poor oversight and tracking of their circumstances.

Parents are not always invited to early discussions about the options for their children and the process for this is not transparent. Thinking about the long-term options for children does not start early enough for many of them.

There is still inconsistency in the quality of social work practice. Where social workers have been involved with children for a significant period of time, they know them well and come to life when talking about them. In addition, some social workers have established strong relationships with children in relatively short periods of time. When direct work with children is meaningful and well considered, children have been helped to better understand their situations and to accept therapeutic support that helps them make sense of their lives. This is not the case for the majority of children.

Many children still experience too many changes of social worker and newly allocated workers typically do not have a thorough command of the key issues for children, due to poor handovers. The impact of staff changes and sickness is evident. This does, at times, have a negative impact on children, resulting in them having to tell their story multiple times, meeting new workers, not being visited on time and not being able to spend time with their families. Overall, the timeliness of visits to children has improved but is not consistently in line with children's needs.

For the vast majority of children in care living with family members or friends, these arrangements are unassessed and insecure due to a confused approach to the regulations and procedures that govern these situations. This includes delays in completing basic checks and protracted assessments undermining permanence arrangements.

The restorative practice model introduced by senior leaders is not clearly identifiable in the work of most social workers or of the council as a whole. Most social workers do talk about how relationships with children and families are important. However, given that the training programme is not fully rolled out to staff, they do not generally understand or apply the model in any further depth. Consequently, planning and support remain more reactive than focused on long-term, sustainable change.

While social workers describe good and regular supervision and support from their managers, this is not reflected in supervision records. Records vary from being regular and clear, with timescales to achieve next steps, to being too vague, with lengthy lists of actions that are not prioritised.

For disabled children who have short breaks in children's homes, social workers demonstrate a good grasp of their evolving needs and how they communicate, carefully balancing the needs of the children with those of the wider family. Children in care who may need an education, health and care plan often wait too long to be assessed. However, the virtual school is increasingly stepping in to support interim school arrangements ahead of the formal assessment and children are offered private therapeutic input when needed to enhance their emotional support.

Plans to extend the supply of homes for children in care through an increase in foster carers and residential homes are still in their early stages. Strategically, the local

authority remains in a position where they are having to respond to crises due to slow progress against their sufficiency plan. Although the number is decreasing and senior leaders have had better oversight, a small number of children are living in unregistered children's homes.

Children who arrive as unaccompanied asylum seekers are placed in suitable accommodation, mostly with families who understand their needs. As demand has increased, the local authority has reacted well.

For the small number of children subject to a deprivation of liberty order obtained through the inherent jurisdiction of the courts, the applications are not tailored to the individual children. This includes orders relating to younger children, for whom the permissions requested are too wide-reaching and generic. Planning lacks the rigour necessary to ensure that restrictions are not permissible for longer than absolutely necessary. Records regarding deprivation of liberty are not clear and some are missing entirely. This limits management oversight and access to important information for these children if workers change.

There is little evidence of how audits influence or shape practice and therefore impact for children is hard to see. Supervision records do not reference the audit outcomes or any reflection on the process from the child's point of view. A third of the audits are completed in isolation, rather than with social workers. This is a missed opportunity for practitioners to learn and to reflect and to ensure that auditor's judgements are informed by discussion with children's social workers as well as by reading their case records. Parents, carers and partners are not consulted as part of the process and this is a further missed opportunity to better understand the wishes and feelings of the child. More positively, the IROs are increasingly confident in challenging or escalating issues when there has been delay in planning for children, and this is leading to improved outcomes for these children.

Recent progress in some areas has relied on energised and committed middle tier managers who can demonstrate the positive impact of the work they are doing for children. This includes work on infrastructure projects, including a recording system redesign that is deliverable and on target; improved performance reporting; an upward trajectory of IROs meeting with children before and between reviews; effective use of the local authority's improvement partner to start strengthening supervision and the quality of assessment in one locality; and, very recently, a more joined-up approach to sufficiency. Encouragingly, these developments are being delivered against a well-understood plan for improvement and a refreshed structure for reviewing progress.

There have been some improvements for children that have taken tenacity to secure, such as an increase in the number of children receiving timely health reviews and a positive offer of private dental care.

Importantly, the Stand Up Speak Up group of young people with care experience is full of energy and ideas, which are channelled into holding the council accountable for delivering improvements for children. It is also encouraging that their suggestions and representations are being taken seriously and implemented. They are obviously growing in confidence as individuals and as a group, with good support.

A complete change of the senior leadership team is too recent to be able to identify any direct impact on the quality of practice with children, but it is certainly unsettling for staff. After a period in which staff showed greater optimism about the future, social workers expressed increased uncertainty to inspectors. The local authority's corporate and political leaders are clear that they must respond quickly and establish a new senior leadership team. However, the continued lack of certainty about senior leadership arrangements for children's services and about the future structure, ethos and direction of travel creates vulnerability in the already slow pace of change to services for children in Devon.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Steve Lowe
His Majesty's Inspector