

22 May 2023

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Dear Julian

Monitoring visit to Devon children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Devon children's services on 18 and 19 April 2023. This was the fifth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in January 2020. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Steve Lowe and Sarah Canto.

Areas covered by the visit

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

- Permanence planning for children.
- The quality and timeliness of life-story work.
- The assessment of children looked after placed with parents.
- Strategic oversight and grip on areas for improvement and oversight by senior leaders, including case audits and supervision.

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

Headline findings

The quality of social work practice across Devon remains inconsistent. Most children in care experience delays in securing permanent homes. This is for a variety of reasons but is mostly due to social workers lacking the confidence, professional curiosity and guidance required to understand children's needs and plan for their futures. Weak management oversight through supervision, insufficient challenge by independent reviewing officers, gaps in recording and poor care planning are often the root cause of these delays. Quality assurance through auditing still lacks

sufficient impact in driving improvements in practice and has required a significant restart.

However, from a low starting point, social workers are increasingly mindful of the importance of helping children to understand their life histories and of securing caring and suitable permanent homes for them as quickly as possible. Although the exception rather than the rule, inspectors found pockets of better practice where this is now being acted on.

The interim but very experienced senior leadership team, supported by a majority of heads of service who are now permanent, has focused on the basic principles of social work since the last monitoring visit. New performance management arrangements, more routine oversight of permanence options and a more open learning culture have resulted in some positive changes and an increased sense of urgency in achieving progress. Although in its infancy, including in terms of its impact, a new quality assurance framework is a positive step. Corporate and political leaders have added weight to the improvement programme financially and by strengthening their own governance arrangements. Crucially, they are engaging partners outside the county council to support the improvement plan, including neighbouring local authorities.

Findings and evaluation of progress

More experienced social workers and those who are permanent are more likely to plan early to achieve adoption for children who could benefit from it, including through fostering to adopt. They demonstrate a clear consideration of cultural matching and an understanding of whether or not it is in children's best interests to remain living with their brothers and sisters. The disabled children's service finds creative solutions to reduce the number of nights children spend away from their families and has a detailed knowledge of the very small number of children who are living in unregistered children's homes.

However, many children are left for longer than necessary without action being taken to achieve their long-term permanence. Agency social work staff continue to make up over 40% of the workforce and in recent months the turnover rate in this cohort has increased significantly. The impact of this lack of consistent relationships for children is particularly apparent when temporary social workers are reliant on other professionals to complete tasks with urgency, for example, when there are delays in the court process or in decisions being made by the Crown Prosecution Service.

Children are mostly visited regularly and at a frequency that meets their needs, more so in the case of those children who keep the same social worker over time. Although not often captured in children's case records or overtly used to inform planning, more frequent visits are helping to support these children to develop and maintain positive relationships with their social workers. Advocates are widely used to amplify children's voices and to offer continuity when social workers change.

Communication techniques used by social workers are generally sensitive to how children choose to engage. Restorative practice coaches are being used intelligently to give an independent insight into how to apply Devon's practice model when working directly with children.

A clear focus on permanence planning since the last monitoring visit has reduced the number of children waiting for a decision about their future by more than half. More active senior manager oversight and regular and more effective use of permanence planning meetings have accelerated these changes. However, this enhanced oversight and decisions about children are not always recorded in children's case files. Contingency plans, to be used if children's situations change, are also not recorded as clearly or as often as they should be. Senior leaders are aware of these shortcomings and have plans to implement a strengthened and more systematic approach in the near future.

Although this is not consistent, some children are helped to understand their life histories and the reasons why they came into care, through skilled direct work by social workers. This is typically supported by longer-term relationships between these children and their workers and by effective use of tools designed to support good communication with children with diverse learning needs.

Children in care who are placed with their parents are living in the right place for them and are almost always supported well by their social workers. For a small number of children who live outside Devon, this support is not as consistent or as strong. However, assessment of these living arrangements and decisions to move children back to their parents in an emergency are not always ratified in writing by senior managers in a timely manner, leaving children in situations where risks are not fully scrutinised.

A small number of children live in unregistered children's homes, usually because of insufficient choice and availability of homes that meet their unique needs. Although this is clearly not suitable for children, these arrangements continue to be overseen by senior managers and team managers who ensure that children receive an increased number of visits and that attempts are made to move children safely into more suitable accommodation. However, the outcome of the weekly review meetings is not always evident on children's records. Apart from those children supported by the disabled children's service, risk assessments, safety plans and notifications to host local authorities are not routinely updated and shared with relevant professionals. This leaves these children more vulnerable than necessary when there are unexpected or unplanned changes in their circumstances, or events such as going missing or placements breaking down.

Although not yet at a level that matches need, there is a steady increase in how consistently and how effectively family members and foster carers are being encouraged to apply for special guardianship orders. In addition to financial assistance, wider advice and support, especially from specialist workers in the

fostering and placement stability teams, supports this transition well. However, this route out of care for children is not routinely sought and a clearly advertised support offer is still in development.

Supervision sessions with social workers are not always used well to support the progress of care plans and can be perfunctory, with records containing more facts than reflection and with limited action plans that often lack specificity.

Following some confusion among social workers about who to go to for decisions and guidance during the ongoing changes in management and leadership, there is a sense of cautious optimism that they are now on a more positive trajectory. Social workers say that communication from the current senior leadership team is much clearer and that they are more visible outside of County Hall, including offering support to those who are working in under-performing teams. Social workers value the support of team managers, who themselves welcome plans to strengthen staffing capacity in the near future.

Quality assurance and performance management structures and systems have been reviewed and are in the early stages of being refreshed and strengthened. New quality performance and review meetings and clearer governance arrangements are showing early signs of promoting both accountability and professional challenge. Audits, however, still lack the impact on practice that is required. This means that they sometimes miss the things that are most important to children, such as the arrangements for spending time with their family and pursuing hobbies and interests.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Steve Lowe
His Majesty's Inspector