

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

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



2 August 2023

Darryl Freeman
Herefordshire County Council
Plough Lane Offices
Hereford
HR4 0LE

Dear Darryl

Monitoring visit to Herefordshire County Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Herefordshire County Council children's services on 28 and 29 June 2023. This was the second monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in July 2022. His Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Alison Smale and Nick Bennison.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the following areas of concern identified at the last inspection:

- Children in need or subject to a protection plan.

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

Headline findings

Since the last inspection, when services were judged to be inadequate, leaders have recognised the scale of improvement and are in the process of implementing a wide-ranging improvement plan. Practice is starting to improve and positive progress is being made with some families. However, the quality and effectiveness of practice with children in need and those subject to a protection plan remain variable. The achievement of more consistently effective practice is hampered by several issues. These include continued high turnover of social workers, a legacy of some families with chronic long-term needs who have experienced poor practice over several years, closure of children's cases to social care before sustained change has been achieved, leading to increased re-referrals, and management support which is not yet consistently effective.

Since the first monitoring visit, there have been significant changes in the political leadership of the council. The new leadership team has confirmed publicly that improvement in children's services continues to be the main council priority and

member induction to enable them to have a clearer understanding of children's social care has been prioritised.

Findings and evaluation of progress

The quality and effectiveness of plans for children and families vary, meaning that too many children continue to experience repeated interventions by children's social care. Their cases are closed prematurely before improved experiences and outcomes for children are sustained. This results in re-referrals as original concerns escalate again. Not all children's plans are up to date, and this hinders progress and an up-to-date view of their needs. For other children, their plans reflect stronger practice, which identifies needs more clearly and therefore children's needs are better met.

Core group and child-in-need meetings are held regularly. However, the effectiveness of these meetings for some families is undermined by them not being face to face. Partner agencies are mostly well involved in planning, which means that many families are supported with additional helpful interventions which aid progress. Family support workers provide helpful practical support to parents. This is combined with enhancing parenting skills through parenting programmes, which makes a tangible difference for some vulnerable families. Other valued support services have a positive impact on children's lives, such as the ECHO service which provides more intensive support. When housing is a need, it takes too long to resolve and is not sufficiently prioritised by housing partners.

Child-in-need plans for children with disabilities are more detailed, with clearer expectations of parents and older children, with practical strategies to support them in the home. The sufficiency of overnight short breaks is a significant gap for families of children with disabilities. Social workers have been able to respond creatively using direct payments to families, but this does not provide the same level of reliable safe care for children. For families of children with disabilities, social workers take the time to see each family member, including non-disabled children. Visits are purposeful. Children are seen on their own and the plan is discussed at these visits as well as at multi-agency meetings.

Too many children experience repeat episodes of child protection planning because the cause for concern continues to reoccur when stepped down to child in need or closed without further support. Some children experience chronic long-term neglect for too long without satisfactory sustainable change. When there are concerns about domestic abuse and substance misuse, over-optimistic risk assessments oversimplify the complexity of concerns about children and their families' capacity to safely parent. Children's wider needs are not well enough recognised and addressed, meaning that progress achieved remains fragile for these children.

Most social workers now benefit from regular management oversight and supervision. Management oversight of frontline practice has not taken place for some social workers in the children with disabilities team but a new team manager is beginning to address this. Supervision records lack critical evaluation and actions

tend to focus on routine process-based tasks rather than timely actions tailored to the needs and progress of individual children.

Regular child protection conferences are mostly well attended by agencies, but until very recently these were held remotely. This means that families have not always met professionals who make important decisions about their lives. Senior management oversight is only now beginning to ensure these are held face to face. The minutes of these meetings do not provide sufficient clarity. They are lengthy and repetitive, without providing a clear risk summary and analysis. This means that some wider risks are not sufficiently explored or considered, and some children may be exposed to unassessed risks, due to over-optimistic risk assessment.

Many children and families continue to experience changes of social worker. Despite this, social workers work hard to quickly get to know children and their families, but inevitably the ongoing changes in social workers have a detrimental impact on continuous progress and trust. Many social workers undertake direct work with children, which provides insight into the child's wishes and feelings. Some of the most vulnerable parents are supported to be involved with decisions and meetings through the appointment of advocates.

Pre-proceedings mechanisms are now in place to escalate plans for children where there have been concerns over a prolonged period, but these are not initiated soon enough for all children. This means that too many children become looked after in a crisis or parents are not involved soon enough to obtain their own legal advice or contribute to future plans. A lack of forward planning for some children means that risks escalate and they become looked after in an unplanned way, which can be more stressful for children and limit placement choice. Most parenting assessments undertaken when pre-proceedings are initiated are thorough and result in appropriate recommendations and decision-making.

When unaccompanied asylum-seeking children come into care, there is delay between the first contact to the local authority and their placement. A manager appropriately makes the decision for them to become looked after. Management decisions are not sufficiently timely or tailored to the individual needs of the child. A lack of timescales means that there is a delay of up to two weeks before children become looked after, without any assessment completed to inform identification of a suitable placement. This delay means a small number of children remain in adult hotels, where they have been placed by the Home Office and may be exposed to safeguarding concerns before a placement is identified.

The corporate intent and commitment to prioritising children's social care expressed by senior leaders in their improvement plans is not yet having sufficient impact. Leaders in Herefordshire know that they have not made enough progress in critical areas like recruitment and retention, and more needs to be achieved at greater pace. Continued high turnover of social workers results in drift and delay for children and reduces the impact of leaders' service improvement plans. Since the first monitoring visit, senior managers have continued to strengthen their line of sight on practice,

recognising that they need to do more to achieve consistent decision-making at key points, but this has not yet had sufficient impact. The local authority's improvement plan does not address issues identified in this visit relating to housing and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. The failure by housing partners to prioritise vulnerable children and families is an added pressure, detrimentally blocking progress for too many families. Senior managers have escalated individual cases and have assured inspectors that more robust arrangements will be in place soon. While the foundations for improvement continue to be strengthened, with greater detail in service plans, improvements in performance information and greater scrutiny and oversight, the quality of practice remains variable.

A strengthened approach to understanding the quality of services for children through an enhanced audit process is becoming more embedded and continues to be improved. This provides senior managers with a more accurate view of practice quality across the service. Plans are in place to involve children and carers in audit feedback. Senior managers are proactive and open to learning from external organisations. They have welcomed the opportunity for peer support to aid service improvement.

Social workers like working in Herefordshire and feel well supported. Senior managers have ensured workloads are manageable, although this is still variable between teams. Social workers value the training and development they receive, and some teams have established regular forums to share good practice. There remains inconsistency in the induction experience for workers and senior managers recognise the need to strengthen the training and development offer.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Alison Smale
His Majesty's Inspector