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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 26 and 27 September 2023. This was the third monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in July 2022. His Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Alison Smale and Louise Hollick.

Areas covered by the visit

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

- Children in care
- Achieving permanence

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 the experiences and progress of children in care were judged inadequate, leaders have achieved only modest progress for children in care. The pace and impact of improvement are too slow. Significant objectives in the improvement plan have been delayed or are not on track. Concerns about children in care have been well known for several years, having received significant public attention even before the inspection last year. The quality of practice for children in care remains inconsistent and children experience too many changes of social worker. Most children are placed with carers who meet their needs, but too many children, particularly those who have been in care for longer, continue to experience delay in confirmation of their permanence. Practice for disabled children has improved but the approach to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children is not equitable or inclusive.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Care plans address children's basic needs, but many lack depth in setting out their day-to-day care, social and leisure needs. Although social workers can verbally describe children's interests, their assessments and reports do not tend to capture children's leisure activities and pursuits. This lack of written detail means that personalised accounts of children's individual lives can be lost when their social worker leaves. Planning for children with complex needs is not sufficiently well considered. Assessments do not explore potential vulnerabilities and strengths in sufficient depth. As a result, some plans are not sufficiently robust or detailed in addressing children's longer-term needs.

Most children benefit from regular statutory reviews, written to the child in a way which will make it easier for them to understand important decisions. Key professionals involved with the child contribute to information-sharing and decision-making. Senior managers acknowledge that the local authority has been slow to return to face-to-face meetings. When children's circumstances change, reviews are not always brought forward to agree significant changes to a plan, meaning that some children experience significant change without a review by an independent reviewing officer (IRO). It is positive that IROs now undertake mid-point reviews, but their effectiveness in monitoring progress varies. For some children, barriers and delays have been successfully escalated and resolved by senior managers, but some children continue to experience drift and delay in their needs being met.

Over three-quarters of children in care have experienced changes of social worker in the last year. Continued high turnover of staff means that direct work with children often focuses on developing a relationship with the new social worker. As a consequence, direct work is underdeveloped and children's views do not influence their plans in a meaningful way. Many social workers vary the frequency of visits to children in line with their perceived need and the stability of their placement and plan. However, some children, such as unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, are not visited at a frequency that supports proactive relationship-building and the capacity to meet their needs in a timely way. The frequency of visits to children placed out of area varies. Some only receive the statutory minimum while visits to others are tailored more to their needs. Infrequent visits make it harder for children to develop a meaningful relationship with their social worker.

A small number of children in care are subject to safeguarding concerns while in care. Some of these are a direct result of placements not meeting the needs of these most vulnerable children. The efficacy of the response to these concerns varies, and most could be more effective. Delays between concerns being raised and holding a strategy meeting have meant that action with partner agencies was not taken soon enough to understand the concerns for some of these children.

The majority of children in care make progress with their physical health, with their needs identified and well met. Leaders have plans to strengthen the mental health service offer to children in care, but it is currently underdeveloped. Therapeutic support is targeted to certain cohorts of children, such as those returning to the care of their parents, but other children's therapeutic needs are not well met.

Most children make educational progress and their personal education plans (PEPs) are used to ensure they get the right support. The practice of the virtual school chairing the discussion around the PEP at the child's statutory review has strengthened the efficacy of PEPs for many children.

The vast majority of children live in stable placements, but too many children do not have the security of a confirmed permanent placement. An improved approach to permanence is being implemented, which has benefited children who have entered care in more recent months. Early permanency is now routinely considered for children at their second review. Decisions to delay permanency plans are understood and purposeful, such as waiting for a finding-of-fact hearing concerning the behaviour of parents, during which time they cannot be ruled out as future carers. Children who have been in care for longer have not had their permanence needs prioritised soon enough and many do not have a clear permanence plan.

Relatives or family friends are considered as carers for children. Recent viability assessments for kinship care are thorough and completed to inform the preliminary decision to place with a friend or relative. Very few special guardianship order (SGO) applications have been made. The potential for special guardianship is not considered for children sufficiently well when this would enable them to achieve a stronger sense of family identity and belonging. As a consequence, some children continue to be looked after subject to a statutory order unnecessarily or for too long.

Placement with parents assessments do not sufficiently consider the long-term vulnerabilities and outcomes for children or, where positive, whether an order is a proportionate outcome. Placement with parent arrangements are often agreed at the conclusion of care proceedings, which suggests that there are outstanding risks which may not have been fully addressed in the assessment. The local authority has reviewed all its placement with parents arrangements and begun to apply to discharge some care orders for children who have been successfully cared for by their parents but subject to a care order for a long time. This remains at an early stage, with only a few children's orders being discharged.

A very small number of children have been placed in unregistered children's homes over the last year. Senior managers have developed and implemented a system to ensure that alternative options are considered thoroughly before a child is placed in an unregistered children's home. Due diligence and quality assurance checks, including a quality assurance visit, are undertaken at the earliest opportunity. Despite this, there have been a small number of occasions when children have been

placed inadvertently in unapproved family households without assessment of their suitability. This suggests more needs to be done at team level to ensure that all social workers and managers understand what constitutes an unregistered placement.

Most disabled children in care are placed with carers and in placements that meet their needs. These children progress well. Consideration is proactively given to children moving back to Herefordshire and moving from residential to foster care when possible, to give them the best opportunity to live in a family environment. The children with disability team uses a well-considered and balanced approach to appropriately identify children who may need deprivation of liberty safeguards (DoLS) to ensure their needs are assessed effectively, considered through the legal gateway panel and referred to the court of protection. Social workers in this part of the service work sensitively and take a child-focused approach, including using direct work to assist children to understand their circumstances and to progress transitions. Children's views are considered and understood and, when possible, included in their care plans. Visit frequency is adapted in line with children's changing needs.

Children in care do not routinely benefit from life-story work to enable them to understand their family history and identity. However, life-story work with disabled children is undertaken to a very high standard. Highly individualised, beautiful and collaboratively produced books present the child's story, their important relationships and the rationale for important decisions in a way that the child can understand their story. This provides a model for how life-story work should be for all children in care.

All unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are routinely placed out of area and do not benefit from living in Herefordshire. There is an assumption that their needs cannot currently be met in Herefordshire and that they are better placed in inner city areas. The care and support of these children is very much left to the carers. Minimal statutory visiting by the allocated social worker has led to some safeguarding concerns. Placement out of area creates a barrier to these children forming close and trusting relationships with their allocated social worker. When these children identify family members who live in the UK who may be able to care for them, not enough effort is made to progress this. There is a lack of drive and management direction to ensure this cohort of children are given the same level of inclusive service and priority as other children in care.

Leaders and senior managers have not given sufficient strategic focus to children in care. While there has been some limited progress, the pace of improvement and progress has been too slow. Some measures have not yet had the desired impact. Many new strategies and standards are not ambitious enough, too generic or only based on minimum requirements, rather than tailored to the needs of children in Herefordshire. The sufficiency plan is modest and generic and does not provide enough clarity about what leaders aspire to achieve for Herefordshire children in care.

Despite improved performance reporting, leaders accept that there have been gaps in key reports which impede the capacity to effectively scrutinise, challenge and improve at key forums. Leaders are endeavouring to address this and have very recently agreed outcome measures for the improvement board and begun to strengthen the corporate parenting board's ability to scrutinise and challenge.

Too few audits are undertaken to provide sufficient insight into the quality of practice and to use audits as a vehicle for effective improvement. The quality of audits continues to vary. Plans for them to become more impact-focused and to involve social workers and families have remained underdeveloped. There is not yet a clear enough link between audit findings, improvement actions and achievements.

Despite extensive efforts to boost recruitment and retention, this remains an ongoing challenge and efforts so far have had limited impact. While there may be early signs that the rate of turnover is reducing, the direct impact of this ongoing disruption in the workforce continues to be a cause for instability and impedes progress to improve practice. However, a tangible improvement can be seen in the children with disability team, which is benefiting disabled children in care. A successful redesign and investment in this service has resulted in increased staffing, with specialist support from family support workers and a more effective use of experienced social workers through the new managing practitioner role. The changes made have achieved greater stability of workers and improved supervision and management support, which are enabling a much-improved service for disabled children.

Strengthening partnerships to enable a helpful and effective context for social workers and practitioners to work effectively with children and families is not progressing at sufficient pace. Engagement by leaders and senior managers with partners is evident but has not yet led to sufficient tangible improvements for children, particularly for their emotional and health needs, and for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in Herefordshire.

Staff are positive about working in Herefordshire and are starting to see the impact of improvements. They increasingly feel well supported by managers, benefiting from regular team meetings and, in some teams, peer and group supervision. However, the quality of formal supervision remains very variable and not all team managers are able to access the frontline managers' development programme.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. You may share this letter with others if you wish.

Yours sincerely

Alison Smale
His Majesty's Inspector