

22 November 2023

Pete Campbell
Director of Children's Services
Council House
Solihull
West Midlands
B91 3QB

Dear Pete

Monitoring visit to Solihull children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Solihull children's services on 18 and 19 October 2023. This was the second monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in November 2022. His Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Rebecca Quested and Andy Waugh.

Areas covered by the visit

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

- The quality of practice for children in need or subject to a protection plan, including plans, planning and purposeful visits that identify and analyse risk and are responsive to need.
- Partnership arrangements to enable effective working together to protect and support children.
- Timeliness of safeguarding checks for children in private fostering placements.
- The sufficiency and stability of the social care workforce, so that children experience fewer changes of social worker.
- Senior leaders' recognition, understanding and ability to address the quality of social work practice, through an accurate evaluation of performance information and implementation of an effective quality assurance framework, and a credible and resourced improvement plan.

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

Headline findings

Social work practice for children in need or subject to a protection plan is slowly beginning to improve the experiences and progress of children, from a low base. This

has become more prevalent in the last couple of months. A significant number of children have experienced too many changes of social worker and a lack of management oversight to drive forward their plans has caused drift and delay. The quality of social work practice across the service continues to be inconsistent and this negatively impacts on the experiences and progress for too many children and families.

The commitment of the corporate leadership is evident in the political and financial support for children's services. The local authority is better focusing its efforts on what needs to improve, supported by the regional improvement partner. The work of the regional improvement partner is beginning to provide better focus on what needs to improve. Greater pace of progress is required, along with the involvement of staff, so that everyone understands what this means for them and the children and families of Solihull.

Findings and evaluation of progress

There are early signs of improvement in social work practice for children in need or subject to child protection plans. This is very recent and not yet consistently embedded across the service. Leaders have remodelled this service in the last six months. This now means children should have fewer changes in their allocated social worker as the range of child in need, child protection and court work is held within the safeguarding and family support (SFS) teams. This is not yet borne out and most children continue to experience too many changes in social worker. This means that children and families need to develop relationships with new social workers and repeat their stories. It also means that social workers effectively have to start again with social work interventions. This leads to drift and delay for children in plans progressing and their circumstances improving.

Plans for child in need and child protection, including plans for disabled children, are inconsistent in their quality. The use of professional jargon and an adult focus means that the voice of the child can be lost. Plans lack clarity about who will be doing what and by when in order to improve children's circumstances. As a result, it is not always easy for parents to understand what needs to change to improve their children's lives. When new concerns arise, or circumstances change, plans are not consistently updated to ensure that there is a review of the response to need or risk.

Some more recent plans demonstrate stronger practice which is improving children's experiences. These plans are more dynamic in responding to changing circumstances, with a focus on risks to children and their needs. Actions are clear, with timescales to hold professionals and parents to account. Contingency planning is evident, with parents being able to understand next steps if the plan is not progressing.

Most social workers in the SFS teams are now developing effective relationships with parents and children, enabling them to understand concerns and what needs to change. Most visits are regular and purposeful. Through direct work, social workers

understand children's experiences. Recently, some children's records are being written to the child and provide a thoughtful and child-focused explanation of the visit. This will help children to understand the purpose and outcomes of social work intervention in their lives, should they read their records now or in the future.

More social workers are now making effective use of safety planning to support children when they live at home. Social workers engage with families in the development of these plans so that they are meaningful. In stronger practice, safety plans are also shared with partner agencies.

Initial and review child protection conferences are usually timely and well attended by partner agencies. Parents and children are supported to attend meetings and to contribute. Social workers mostly prepare detailed and evaluative reports which lead to comprehensive discussions and consideration of current risks and needs. Review child protection conferences consider the continuing level of risk to children and whether to step down to child in need plans. Partners contribute to the shared decision-making.

There is not yet consistent application of thresholds. For some children, professionals are over-optimistic when relating small improvements to reduced risks and significant histories are not consistently used to understand current circumstances. This is also seen through some children being removed from child protection plans due to parental non-engagement. This means that leaders cannot be confident that all risks have reduced and that safety factors are embedded.

In the last couple of months, there has been progress in core groups and child in need meetings taking place regularly. This is leading to more plans progressing and to some children's experiences improving. There is variability in partner agencies' attendance at these meetings. When they do attend, this supports the plan's progression and is leading to improved progress for children.

Social workers spoke positively about the impact of recent changes in their recording system, which they say is saving time and directing them to focus on what is important. It is too early in the implementation of these changes for their impact to be evaluated. Social workers understand that there is a new practice model but were not consulted about this and have not received training to prepare them for this change. This limits the effectiveness and consistency of social work practice and impacts the experiences of children and families.

Supervision is now driving forward more children's plans. This is not yet consistent and leaders have plans to address this. Newly qualified social workers value the quality of their supervision and the support available to them, which has been crucial in them being able to manage the complex and challenging work they are undertaking.

Management oversight of the step-down process for children in need or subject to child protection plans is not yet consistent. As a result, some child in need plans are

closed and stepped down to early help without child in need meetings taking place and, at times, without evidence of discussion with the family. This does not ensure effective measuring of the plan's progress for children or ensure that partner agencies are part of the decision-making process.

Most disabled children do not benefit from having a consistent social worker who can progress their plans to ensure their needs are met. Disabled children are visited at home and in school and consideration is given to the wider family needs. However, recording of visits lacks detail and does not always reflect children's experiences or the child's individual needs. Some disabled children and their families wait for long periods for the right support to be provided.

Since the last inspection, arrangements for children who are privately fostered have improved. Private foster care arrangements are recognised and safeguarding checks are now completed in a timely way. Visits to children are consistent and ensure the current arrangements are meeting the children's needs. There has been increased awareness-raising within children's services and with partners and community groups. This has led to an increase in enquiries but records have not been maintained to demonstrate the positive impact of this work and where resources may need to be targeted.

The corporate leadership continues to provide a strong political and financial commitment to the improvement agenda for children's services in Solihull. This has led to recent changes, including in the recruitment of permanent staff, which now require more pace. The governance arrangements between the chief executive, the leader, lead member and the director of children's services and the children's commissioner are supporting progress.

There remains a lack of detail and clarity in the improvement plan, which does not yet provide a clear measure of what progress has been made and what is required to improve outcomes for children. This limits its effectiveness. Senior leaders are now benefiting from the recent support of the regional improvement partner, who is providing operational and strategic support with the improvement process. Progress is under way in the implementation of operational data measurement which will provide additional tools to improve understanding of social work practice.

There continues to be a high reliance on agency staff, including at first tier management level. Although there is some stability in the agency staff used, this does not promote sustainable improvements. Recent recruitment of newly qualified social workers is positive and there is a commitment to support their development during their first three years through the children's social care academy. Senior leaders ensure that these newly qualified social workers benefit from protected workloads, through the employment of additional agency staff.

The range of quality assurance processes is developing. The number of recent case file audits in this service area is low and audits have been used to manage individual performance. This does not support the strategic use of audit activity in demonstrating any improvements in practice. Audits focus on compliance rather than the impact of social work practice in improving children's lives. Audits are completed collaboratively with social workers, which helps to contribute to this process being a learning experience for the social worker. Most of the required actions identified in the audits had not been followed up until the notification that these audits would be part of the activity of this monitoring visit. This means actions focused on progressing children's plans have not taken place and that the audit activity process is not leading to improvements for children or learning for the local authority.

Most social workers know the senior leadership team and report that heads of service are visible and accessible. There remains more to do for all staff to know who the director of children's services is and to bring about a greater understanding of what the improvement plans mean for staff and children and families in Solihull.

Social workers in this part of the service were positive about working for Solihull. They feel well supported by managers and most say their caseloads are manageable. The new SFS service has been positively received by social workers, who value being able to continue to work with families when there is a change in children's plans.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Rebecca Quested
His Majesty's Inspector