

21 February 2024

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Dear Beate

Monitoring visit to Solihull children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Solihull children's services on 17 and 18 January 2024. This was the third monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in November 2022. His Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Rebecca Quested and Lisa Walsh.

Areas covered by the visit

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

- Children subject to a letter before proceedings and the quality and impact of pre-proceedings interventions.
- Children on the edge of care, including 16- and 17-year-old children who present as homeless.
- The quality of decisions about children entering care.

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

Headline findings

The early signs of improvement in social work practice seen at the last monitoring visit are embedding in the safeguarding and family support teams. This is leading to more consistency in the experiences and progress of most children and families in this part of the service.

A new director of children's service (DCS) has been appointed since the last monitoring visit. The presence of a permanent stable senior leadership team, heads of service and team managers has mitigated any upheaval for social workers. The continued commitment of the corporate leadership and support from the regional

improvement partner are supporting the DCS to take forward the improvements planned with greater pace.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Since the last inspection, social work practice has improved. There is better understanding of the need to use the pre-proceedings element of the Public Law Outline to secure early permanence for children.

Referrals regarding concerns about unborn babies are mostly referred to children's social care in a timely way, usually by midwifery services. Social workers complete thorough assessments which include the extended family. The use of family group conferences supports planning for early permanence within kinship care if parents are unable to meet children's needs.

Social workers are committed to building relationships with families, including those who are reluctant to engage in child protection planning. They ensure that children have access to an advocate to support them in sharing their views. Most social workers make child-centred decisions to progress plans so that they can understand children's experiences.

Social workers spend time getting to know their children well. They complete direct work to ensure that children understand why social workers are involved in their lives. Social workers' discussions with inspectors bring children to life. Their knowledge of children's risks, needs and views is mostly well captured in case records.

Managers provide support and guidance to social workers more consistently. This takes place through formal supervision and also through providing management direction at key points in social work intervention. This is well recorded on assessments and review meetings as well as on the case management system when discussions have taken place outside of formal meetings. This ensures that children and families can understand the rationale for decision-making.

The use of pre-proceedings has improved since the standard inspection in November 2022. Referral to pre-proceedings is usually completed promptly. The work is more focused and effective in achieving early permanence for children, especially for unborn babies. This improvement minimises drift and delay for children.

Managers monitor the progress of children within the pre-proceedings process carefully. This is through detailed team manager oversight as well as legal planning meetings which take place at regular intervals, as well as when specifically needed, to ensure that child-focused decision-making is made at the right time for children.

Effective decisions can be made at legal gateway meetings and legal planning meetings because the right people are present. The minutes of meetings are detailed

and show consideration of all options for permanence for children with a clear rationale about decision-making. This ensures that anyone who reads these, including the child, can understand how important decisions have been made.

Letters before proceedings are variable in quality. During the visit, the local authority took action to ensure that there is improved consistency in how social workers complete these templates. Most pre-proceedings agreements provide sufficient detail about what the risks are and what steps have been taken to mitigate them. Some lack time frames to provide clarity of expectations to parents. In stronger examples, the pre-proceedings agreement is specific and detailed and evaluates the risks to the child sensitively.

Children benefit from being in pre-proceedings. For most of the children who are stepped out of pre-proceedings, there has been effective support which has secured parental change and children's experiences have improved, allowing them to remain in their parents' care. This is not yet consistent and for a minority of children there is an overoptimism that the level of risk of harm has reduced, with a of lack evidence of sustained change and despite the objection of the child's independent reviewing officer.

When 16- and 17-year-old children present to the local authority as homeless, there is a well-coordinated joint response from children's social care and housing. Most children are initially supported to return to their family when it is safe to do so. Alternatively, assessments are undertaken to secure suitable accommodation when this is more appropriate for the child. Social workers now ensure that children are fully informed of their rights, entitlements and options to address their homeless situation; they are now being offered the support of an advocate. This is an improvement from what was found at the time of the standard inspection in November 2022.

Edge of care support is usually provided by the allocated social worker or early help worker within an identified plan. The progress and recording of these plans are not well developed. While this intervention supports children to remain at home in the care of their parents, it does not provide the coordinated, intensive support that a dedicated edge of care service can provide. The local authority recognises this, and has a clear plan with recruitment under way to develop this service.

Most children now come into care at a time that is right for them. Child-centred decision-making ensures that children remain living within kinship care in their community, and with their brothers and sisters, whenever possible. This ensures that children can maintain important relationships in their lives and their attendance at schools and social activities while being safeguarded.

The new DCS was previously the independent scrutineer for Solihull Safeguarding Children Partnership and her knowledge of the local authority and partners has assisted her smooth transition into the role. The strong governance arrangements

between the chief executive, the leader, lead member and the director of children's services and the children's commissioner continue to support progress.

The work of the regional improvement partner is providing capacity to the local authority to progress with its improvement plans operationally and strategically. Greater detail and clarity in the improvement plan is focusing this work. Social workers are now more aware of the vision for Solihull to improve and what that means for them. Social workers report that the stability in their line management has supported them with the recent changes in senior leadership. They value the training and development opportunities available to them.

The quality assurance process continues to develop. There remain limitations in the effectiveness of audit activity on social work practice due to the small numbers completed. Audits are completed with social workers and valuable feedback is sought from parents and carers. Auditors do not include children's views, which is a missed opportunity. When auditors identify shortfalls in practice, there is a system to ensure that these are addressed promptly. This benefits the individual social worker's practice. The local authority is taking steps to ensure that learning from quality assurance activity will inform social work practice more widely across the service. However, it is too soon to see the impact of this work.

Most social workers now benefit from regular supervision which is usually reflective and contributing to the progress of children's plans. Social workers continue to report positively on the reduction in handover points for children and families, with the development of the safeguarding and support teams. This enables social workers to develop meaningful relationships with families and ensures that children and families are experiencing fewer changes of social worker. As a result, social work practice with children and families is improving.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Rebecca Quested
His Majesty's Inspector