

16 May 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 16 and 17 April 2024. This was the fourth 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:

- Permanence planning, to ensure that the full range of permanence options are achieved in a timely way for all children in care.
- The impact of independent reviewing officers (IROs), to ensure that children's plans are progressed, that drift and delay is challenged and that escalation is effective.
- Corporate parenting responsibilities for children in care, including consultation and partnership with the children in care group OVOS (Our Voice, Our Services), to ensure that this is prioritised and embedded across the council and all partners.

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

Headline findings

Strategic plans to secure permanence for children in care are beginning to have a positive impact on children. This is clearly evident for those children who have become looked after in the last six months. Plans are beginning to impact on those children who have been in care long term, however, the local authority knows the pace of this work needs to increase for those children who have experienced drift and delay over many years. IROs are now ensuring more children's permanence plans are progressed, although this is not consistent. IROs are using escalation

processes appropriately, however, delays in management responses mean this is not effective for many children.

The corporate parenting board is making significant progress from a low base. It has been remodelled with clear lines of governance and meaningful involvement of partners. There is more to do to ensure that children's participation is shaping services.

Findings and evaluation of progress

For children who have become looked after in the last six months, decisions regarding permanence are well timed. Social workers, managers and IROs are working together effectively to progress children's permanence plans.

Senior leadership and management oversight is present when decisions are made about where children in care are living and when they need to move. It is positive to see that the children's commissioning team's efforts to secure the right home for children are also included in their records, which ensures that children can understand how important decisions have been made about where they live.

Too many children are living in unregulated care and unregistered children's homes. A system of strategic oversight ensures that most children are being tracked so that their living arrangements become regulated as soon as possible. While this is beginning to lead to more children's permanence being secured, leaders know there is more to do.

Most children are living with long-term foster carers and are making good progress from the point of becoming looked after. Foster carers provide warm and caring environments that are enabling children to flourish.

When children return to their parents' care, the assessments to inform the discharge of care orders are comprehensive. They explore family history and how interventions have helped parents sustain change to keep children safe. Analysis of risks and needs are fully explored and lead to clear decisions for next steps.

Over recent months, there has been a focus on securing permanence for children living with their parents, which is gaining momentum from a low base. Senior leaders are now monitoring this process effectively. Solihull has an agreed protocol in place to fast track applications to revoke care orders with Cafcass. As a result, more children are safely living with their parents without the unnecessary intervention of children's services. Given the historically high numbers of children in care living with their parents, senior leaders are developing additional social work posts to progress more children's plans at pace, where it is safe to do so.

Social workers visit children in line with their identified needs. Social workers know their children very well and speak about them with real affection. Children's views are consistently sought and acted on. Social workers create sensitive records which are consistently written to the child.

Most care plans include clear arrangements for children to spend time with those people who matter to them. Social workers ensure that links with children's birth families and other important people are maintained when this is appropriate and in line with their wishes. This supports children's sense of identity.

Most children's health needs are well met. Social workers ensure that children access the right emotional and mental health services to meet their needs, including bereavement counselling. The majority of children are now up to date with their health assessments and dentist and optician appointments. This is an area of significant improvement from the inspection in November 2022.

Children are generally progressing well at school, with additional support accessed through their personal education plans and education, health and care plans when appropriate. Children are encouraged to engage in community-based activities, which supports them to develop friendships outside school.

Children's reviews are taking place in a timely way. Children contribute to their reviews and some are offered advocates to support them in sharing their views. Most IROs visit children to discuss their plans and to understand how they are progressing.

Since the inspection in November 2022, there has been improved oversight by IROs to drive forward plans to ensure that children are safe and receiving permanent care. However, this is not yet consistent and there is too much variability in the quality of children's review minutes and plans. Some care plans lack detail and timebound actions to ensure that there is progress for children. For some children, these documents do not include accurate information on how to progress their plans effectively. Consequently, some children continue to experience drift and delay.

IROs are making better use of the dispute resolution system to escalate concerns about drift and delay around care planning, as well as other concerns. However, there are significant delays in some managers responding to these escalations, which impacts on the effectiveness of this process.

Most children in care long term have experienced delay in securing permanence. This is the case for those with plans for adoption, plans for long-term foster care and those with plans to leave care. This includes children who are living with their parents or children whose needs will be best met through a special guardianship order or child arrangements order. For some children, this delay is significant. There is evidence of senior leaders' plans beginning to have an impact for some children, with more permanence plans being secured in the last six months and evidence of more permanence plans on track to be secured in the near future. Senior leaders recognise there is much more to do and have introduced increased oversight and resources to ensure that children's plans are progressed.

The senior leaders in the local authority continue to work together effectively and provide the political and financial commitment to support children's services'

improvement agenda. Alongside this, the continued support of the children's commissioner provides continued focus on improvement. The involvement of the regional improvement partner is providing additional senior leadership and management capacity to support and mentor staff.

There has been significant progress from a low base in the operation of the corporate parenting board in the last 12 months. A new chair, who is the deputy leader of the council, has established a clear governance structure that includes a community parenting board. There is better engagement from partners, which is evidenced through them taking responsibility for chairing the five champions groups. Positively, council leaders and the wider community are providing opportunities for employment, internships and mentoring. There is a golden thread running from the corporate parenting strategy objectives to the champions groups, demonstrating high aspirations for children.

Children and young people are more involved in influencing council decision-making. However, this area remains underdeveloped and leaders recognise there is much more to do to ensure that all children in care have opportunities to influence the development of children's services and to be involved in participation events.

Quality assurance processes are becoming more effective and are leading to improvements in practice. There is improved compliance in the completion of audits over the last quarter. Auditors are now seeking feedback from carers more consistently, which adds a richness to the audit quality. There is improvement in auditors' understanding of what good practice looks like and how identified actions are pulled through to supervision templates, which ensures that the loop is closed in rectifying shortfalls in children's records.

Recent recruitment activities have been positive and the reliance on agency social workers is reducing. A new practice model has been launched following consultation and an all-staff conference. Social workers are embracing the new social work practice model and standards.

Social workers, including agency staff, are highly committed to their children. They spoke positively about the progress that Solihull children's social care is making. Staff know the leadership team and have confidence in the DCS's leadership. Social workers know what the plan is for Solihull and they feel proud to be part of the improvement journey.

Social workers feel well supported by managers and senior leaders. Caseloads are mostly manageable. Supervision for social workers in this part of the service is being carried out more regularly, with new timebound actions being set which have a focus on moving the child's plan forward. Leaders know there is more to do so that this consistently impacts on the progress of children's plans.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Rebecca Quested
His Majesty's Inspector