

The Axis Building
10 Holliday Street
Birmingham
West Midlands
B1 1TF

T 0300 123 1231
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



14 May 2018

Dr Catherine Driscoll
Director of Children, Families and Communities
Worcestershire County Council
County Hall
Spetchley Road
Worcester
WR5 2NP

Dear Catherine

Monitoring visit to Worcestershire County Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit of Worcestershire children's services on 18 and 19 April 2018. This was the fourth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged to be inadequate in November 2016. The visit was carried out by Alison Smale and Andy Waugh, Her Majesty's Inspectors.

The local authority is making progress in improving services for children and young people.

Areas covered by the visit

During this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress of children in care, with a particular focus on placement stability and achieving permanence for young people aged over 16. Additionally, inspectors reviewed the quality of practice in the care leavers' service.

A range of evidence was considered during the visit, including electronic case records, supervision records and observation of social workers, personal advisers and team managers. Inspectors spoke to children in care and care leavers.

Evaluation and Progress

The quality of support offered to children in care and care leavers has improved since the last inspection of children's services in November 2016. Leaders increasingly understand their services and this knowledge is starting to result in improvements in practice. A continued commitment to ensuring appropriate financial resources for children's services is enabling progress. As a result, children are starting to receive better support and services.

Many of the positive changes are very recent, however, and not all children and young people in Worcestershire receive consistently appropriate support. Some children and young people told inspectors that they receive good support from their social workers and personal advisers, especially when they continue to have the same worker. However, a small number of children and young people continue to experience changes of worker. This, at times, can result in interruptions to children's plans, and, as a result, they do not always maintain placement stability or achieve their agreed care plan.

A very recent restructuring of services has created a new 'throughcare' service, which includes teams responsible for children in care, care leavers and an outreach support service. Children in care team managers receive comprehensive and up-to-date performance information. This improved performance information is beginning to support learning and a culture of improvement among some of the throughcare service management team. However, the care leavers dashboard is at an early stage of development and is not yet sufficiently developed. Therefore, it is not yet providing the same level of understanding. The vast majority of the throughcare workforce have welcomed recent structural and practice changes. Social workers and managers told inspectors that they feel secure during this period of significant change. Managers within the throughcare service have a clear vision for the service. This reflects a positive culture.

Staff feel supported, and management oversight is evident in nearly all cases. However, management oversight is not sufficiently robust. It does not provide critical evaluation and actions that effectively progress cases. Management oversight must be stronger, with clear evaluation and actions which support staff to make positive and timely actions for children.

Social workers and personal advisers know the children and young people that they work with well. The workforce is increasingly enthusiastic and committed, demonstrating positive culture and morale. While individual workers can articulate a picture of what young people's lives are like, and the support needed, this is not detailed well enough in recorded documents. Social workers and personal advisers ensure that young people receive their entitlements, but this is not sufficiently detailed in plans and reviews. As a result, good practice is not sufficiently referenced in documents, meaning that valuable information may be lost when there is a change of social worker or personal adviser.

The local authority is aware that children's plans are not consistently good. Too many lack sufficient detail, analysis and smart enough actions. Dual pathway and care plans result in duplication and may result in a loss of focus when one plan contains insufficient detail. Some young people experience delay in actions being completed. A very small number of plans are written in the first person, led by young people, and these better reflect the young person's voice and perspective.

Transition planning for young people leaving care does not start soon enough. Young people experience delay in being allocated a personal adviser and having an up-to-date pathway plan. This means that young people do not always have as long as they need to prepare for independence.

The outreach team in the throughcare service is valued by young people with more complex needs, offering an intensive level of support. Inspectors saw evidence of effective partnership working with housing, and positive transitions for young people who need adult social care. Young people are supported to pursue routine health appointments but health services involvement is not always sufficient for young people with additional health needs. Social workers report that the virtual school team has become more effective, with the Personal Education Plan (PEP) coordinators being knowledgeable and helpful at resolving issues. PEPs are used to provide extra support for young people, for example extra tuition and support in colleges. However, children's educational needs are not sufficiently reflected in care plans and pathway plans.

The local authority understands that further work is needed to ensure that caseloads are weighted and balanced so that social workers and personal advisers can meet the complex needs of some young people and make sure that they receive effective support.

Corporate parenting arrangements are now a strength. Leaders have done much to improve on how they listen to children by broadening the range of children and young people with whom they consult. Relevant issues are now discussed at the corporate parenting board and this is resulting in a positive impact for children in care and care leavers. For example, care leavers are now exempt from paying council tax regardless of where they live in Worcestershire. A new promise in the form of a 'pledge' to children in care and care leavers is in place and this is starting to support a more consistent offer.

While the quality assurance and performance framework is comprehensive and triangulated, it is not yet sufficiently effective. Practice standards rely too heavily on processes. Too many audits focus on compliance rather than the experiences of children and young people and the impact of practice. Audits will benefit from more extensive moderation to ensure a comprehensive view of practice and impact. Despite the local authority's intention in its quality assurance framework, only a very small minority of audits capture the views of children and parents or carers, and this

limits the link between audit and service improvement. Individual service user feedback at team level is increasing, but more needs to be done to embed this across all teams.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you and your staff for your positive engagement with the programme of monitoring visits. I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Alison Smale
Her Majesty's Inspector