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Dear Dr Driscoll

Monitoring visit to Worcestershire County Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit of Worcestershire County Council children's services on 2 and 3 October 2018. This was the sixth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged to be inadequate in November 2016. The visit was conducted by Alison Smale and Andy Waugh, two of Her Majesty's Inspectors.

The local authority continues to make progress in improving services for children and young people.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors evaluated the local authority's arrangements for children in care up to the age of 16. Inspectors considered the experiences and progress of children in care open to locality and through-care teams.

A range of evidence was looked at. This included holding case discussions with social workers and reviewing case records. Inspectors also scrutinised relevant local authority performance management and quality assurance information.

Evaluation and Progress

The quality of support offered to children in care has improved since the last inspection of children's services in November 2016. A recent service restructure has increased access to management support for social workers. Improved social work practice for children in care is resulting from better quality supervision and more

robust quality assurance, reinforced by successful recruitment of an increased number of permanent social workers.

The local authority uses legal processes and care proceedings effectively. This protects children and ensures that timely plans are implemented in order to secure their long-term future when they are exposed to significant harm. Care proceedings are only initiated when they are in a child's best interest. The local authority is taking steps to improve their edge of care offer, which is currently under-developed.

Evidence in proceedings is increasingly robust, with some social workers presenting excellent oral and written evidence. Timeliness of proceedings has improved, and the vast majority of care proceedings are now completed within 26 weeks. This minimises delay and uncertainty for children and families. This improvement has been achieved as a consequence of more robust management oversight, good-quality legal advice and effective case-tracking systems. Social workers are increasingly confident about their work with children and families in legal proceedings and they feel well supported by managers.

The local authority has appropriately made a concerted effort to ensure that historical cases of chronic neglect and cases where children are voluntarily accommodated are being dealt with in court. This means that the vast majority of children are safeguarded, and that where there has previously been drift and delay, decisions are now being made to ensure permanency. However, for a small number of children long-term chronic neglect is still not responded to quickly enough through use of public law outline and legal planning meetings. This means that some children experience sustained poor parenting and concerning home environments for too long.

Letters to parents before proceedings do not provide them with sufficient clarity. Language is too professionalised. Letters are onerous to read and do not include clear timescales. This means that parents may not be fully aware at this critical time about what is required of them in order to prevent the local authority initiating care proceedings in relation to their children.

Assessments have improved in quality, and better practice is well embedded. Use of the local authority's practice model is supporting accurate analysis of needs and strengths. Social workers work hard to get to know children and understand their individual needs. All children in care benefit from regular updates to the assessment of their needs, and these assessments are routinely completed ahead of each child's looked after review. Updates to assessments are also made when children's circumstances change significantly. However, assessments do not consistently explore historic patterns of concern or the trigger points for a child becoming distressed. This means that the complex behaviours presented by some children with challenging needs are not always sufficiently well understood.

Children's care plans are reviewed and updated regularly. Better quality planning is leading to positive change for many children. However, some plans, particularly for those with more complex or challenging needs, do not contain sufficiently detailed actions to ensure that children receive the right help at the right time. For example, the local authority reunifies children with their parents where it is in the children's best interests following the making of a care order. Although a care plan is in place for these children, they do not have the benefit of a formal placement with parents' agreement. Contingency plans are not made sufficiently clear. More consideration needs to be given to the potential stresses which might undermine a placement and how best to support children and families, as well as options for action should a placement begin to disrupt.

The timeliness and quality of children looked after reviews have improved. Independent reviewing officers involve children and ensure that their voices are heard when children's care plans are being reviewed. Reviews progress children's plans by setting increasingly detailed actions with timescales for completion. In some cases, it is heartening to see emerging good practice in the way that independent reviewing officers are recording review meetings. These records address the child directly in a way that the child will understand either now or in the future, depending on their age. This enables children to understand their care experience and the decisions made that affect their lives.

Children are safe and are placed appropriately. The local authority is aware that there are delays in confirming permanent alternative homes for some children who are challenging to care for. This means that they wait lengthy periods before being able to develop a sense of belonging or security. Practice is improving, and children are increasingly benefiting from careful and inclusive forward-planning that leads to successful matching. When new placements are made for children who have experienced placement breakdowns, social workers are overly optimistic. This means that the risk of a further breakdown is not mitigated against soon enough and the potential for disruption is heightened.

Use of a child sexual exploitation screening tool to assist with risk assessment and planning is not consistently used for children looked after. Despite this, inspectors saw some good examples of social workers addressing child sexual exploitation concerns and keeping children safe. Where vulnerabilities emerge, staff explore these further with young people, using creative approaches and working with partners to keep children safe. Social workers are proactive when children go missing in order to ensure that children feel confident to talk about the experiences they have while missing and to take action to protect them from future risk.

Completion of children's health assessments has improved. Most children's health assessments are up to date. This means that needs are identified and are being met through appropriate planning and action. Following a recent review with health partners, assessment processes have improved and additional resources are in place.

For a significant minority of children looked after, their educational needs are not sufficiently well met. For example, when children change placement, some have good plans in place, while for others planning is ineffective and results in children experiencing periods where they are not receiving education.

Too many changes in social workers make it difficult for many children looked after to building trusting relationships. The authority has worked hard and successfully to recruit and retain more staff, and this is beginning to improve continuity of social worker for children.

Life-story work is not yet consistently completed for all children looked after, although this is an improving situation. Some children have the benefit of detailed and accessible life-story work, but children are not always involved in a meaningful way, so this work is done to them rather than with them.

The voice and experiences of children are reflected in assessments, plans and reviews through direct work and observation of children. This means that children are increasingly listened to and their views and wishes are making a difference in decisions which affect their lives. The local authority has acknowledged that a very small number of children had not been consulted about a planned closure of their residential home. These children had not been given strong enough independent advocacy about this decision or information about their rights. Neither management processes or children's statutory reviews had afforded them sufficient support to challenge or improve this experience. Senior managers recognise that the impact of the changes for these children was not sufficiently considered and have learned lessons that will inform any future strategic plans. They were able to evidence improved planning for the engagement and consultation of children and young people in proposed developments for their edge of care service.

Supervision and management direction for social workers is improving. Staff find supervision helpful and supportive and supervision is regular and up to date. Work to embed the local authority's social work practice model is taking place on an individual basis in supervision. Most supervision recording evidences reflection and actions, but is not reinforced by sufficient professional curiosity and critical challenge. Actions are not always followed through to ensure continuity and progress for children. Frontline managers consider presenting issues, but do not explore and anticipate underlying factors sufficiently to ensure supervision is a consistent, positive force in progressing children's plans.

Managers try to ensure that workloads are manageable. While most children are seen regularly through statutory visits, visit frequency is not always proportionate to their level of need or enough to build a trusting relationship with a child.

The local authority's audit approach is a strength. Audits lead to improvement actions for individual cases and also inform service improvement. However, audits remain too focused on process, which limits its impact on practice quality.

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