

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231
Textphone 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/ofsted



3 August 2018

Dr Catherine Driscoll
Worcestershire
Spetchley Road
Worcester
WR5 2YA

Dear Dr Driscoll

Monitoring visit of Worcestershire children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Worcestershire children's services on 11 July 2018. The visit was the fifth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in November 2016. The visit was carried out by Andrew Waugh and John Roughton, Her Majesty's Inspectors and Lee-Anne Farach, Ofsted Inspector.

Overall, the local authority is making satisfactory progress to improve services for its children and young people. Good progress is being made in the areas of assessment and quality assurance. Progress in other areas, such as planning for children, is more variable and requires further focused work.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the area of children subject to child protection and child in need assessments and plans. Inspectors considered whether assessments identify children's needs appropriately, and whether children's plans are effectively supporting progress in order to meet needs and reduce the risks that children may be subject to.

The visit considered a range of evidence, including tracking of children's cases and sampling electronic case records and supervision notes. In addition, we spoke to a range of staff, including managers and social workers.

Overview

The local authority's senior leaders and elected members have a realistic understanding of progress that has been made. They are aware that much work remains to be done in some areas to ensure that children receive good services. For example, management review and challenge of children's plans require prompt action to ensure that outcomes are measurable and are achieved in a timely way.

Political interest and investment in children's social care services remain high priorities, providing the additional resources required for senior managers to implement change. For example, the local authority has implemented a strong recruitment strategy that offers good financial and practical support to new social work staff. As a result, and since the last monitoring visit, the authority has been successful in recruiting a large number of social workers.

Management structures have been enhanced and social workers' caseloads have been reduced. The role and use of advanced social work practitioners are helping to further embed a culture of reflection and learning. Children are now experiencing more stability, with fewer changes of social worker, and this enables them to build positive relationships.

It is clear that the morale of both managers and social workers is positive, which is reflected in an overall increase in confidence, resulting in some creative, resourceful and reflective practice. This is a positive trajectory of change. The local authority continues to provide agency workers with the same opportunities as their permanent colleagues, which is beneficial to the overall quality of practice.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Based on the evidence gathered during the visit, we identified areas of strength, areas where improvement has already started to be evident and some areas where significant work remains to be made.

The local authority has invested significantly in a strength-based model of intervention for working with children and families. All staff have received the basic training, with more detailed training to follow. Inspectors saw evidence that in some parts of the service, the model is being used effectively in casework and supervision. However, it is not yet consistently implemented across the service. The model is soon to be 'rolled out' to partners, underpinned by a financial investment from these partners to support the training.

The local authority has developed a whole-system approach to quality assurance, with several avenues for checking user experience being explored, including manager peer audits that are also moderated independently. Service user feedback forms part of the audit, with group managers ensuring that actions identified are completed. In addition, thematic audits are used to further enhance social work practice and develop services. Inspectors found the audits of these cases and the children's circumstances accurately reflect the quality of social work practice that was seen. This demonstrates that managers can accurately identify good standards of work and are challenging themselves appropriately.

Social workers reported that supervision was regular and reflective, increasingly using a strength-based approach. However, this was not fully reflected by what inspectors saw in practice. Some supervision is not timely and supervision records do not consistently evidence what actions are needed sufficiently clearly. Furthermore, the result of actions is not always followed through by supervisors. In some cases,

management oversight is inconsistent and lacks challenge to drift and delay. Informal decision-making processes are relied on too frequently and are not recorded on children's records. There is no evidence that supervision is effectively driving plans for children.

Assessments that have commenced in the last eight months are consistently of a good quality and are an area in which practice has improved. Family history is routinely considered, along with the effective use of chronologies. The child's voice is regularly evidenced and informs planning. In the majority of cases seen, there is evidence that social workers are completing direct work. However, this better practice is not present in all cases. Management oversight with a clear synopsis and rationale for further intervention is evident in all cases. Some cases also evidenced that managers are challenging recommendations made by social workers. This demonstrates that managers have a clear understanding of the work completed by social workers and that the right actions and services are in place to improve children's outcomes.

For children in need where cases have been open longer than six months, the local authority is aware that there is a legacy of drift and delay and is completing a review of all children in need cases. Some child in need assessments are not being updated when required and this results in plans that are not fully informed or are out of date. In the majority of these cases, partner agencies are consulted during the completion of assessments but in some, key professionals, for example health professionals, are not consulted. When professional views are sought, it is not always clear what their views are regarding the presenting concerns and what should happen next. This results in assessments not being fully informed and the outcomes not addressing the needs of children.

Planning for children continues to be an area of practice that requires further improvement. Plans for children are not always focused on their needs, and there is a lack of clarity about what needs to be achieved to ensure positive outcomes. Better plans are child focused and evidence improved outcomes for children. Plans for some children in need evidence too much drift and delay and a lack of progress in improving outcomes. Where a plan is not achieving desired outcomes, there is little evidence of challenge and there are no contingency plans in place to take account of this. The impact of multi-agency working in progressing child protection and child in need plans is too variable and does not routinely improve outcomes for children. It is not clear who is monitoring the progress of plans between reviews. This means that children are potentially left in situations of risk for too long.

The local authority is currently in the process of changing its model of social work practice. It is introducing a strength-based model and this has been received favourably by some social workers, who report that it benefits their practice. However, some cases evidenced inconsistent practice because social workers are using a range of different assessment templates. In some cases, the strength-based assessment template is not fully used, with significant amounts of information being put into the recommendations and rationale box.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you and your staff for your positive engagement throughout this monitoring visit.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Andy Waugh
Her Majesty's Inspector