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Dear Mr Spencer

Focused visit to Gloucestershire children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Gloucestershire children's services between 6 and 8 October 2020. The inspectors were Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) Social Care, Nigel Parkes, Rachel Griffiths, Steve Lowe and Diane Partridge, and Stephen Lee, Senior HMI.

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic.

The methodology for this visit was in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. However, the delivery model was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 context. This visit was carried out partly by remote means. While two inspectors were primarily on site speaking to social workers, managers and leaders in local authority offices, three inspectors used video calls for discussions with local authority social workers, managers and leaders. The lead inspector and the director of children's services agreed arrangements to deliver this visit effectively while working within national and local guidelines for responding to COVID-19 and meeting the needs of the local authority's workforce.

Overview

Children's services in Gloucestershire are still on the road to recovery, with continued weaknesses in some areas. A legacy of poor decision-making, poor assessments, plans that lacked focus and a lack of management grip, combined with

historically high levels of staff turnover, mean that the improvement journey has been far from straightforward. The pace of change has been a recurrent cause for concern. As recently as February this year, local authority's own audits demonstrated that work in between a fifth and a quarter of cases failed to meet basic minimum standards.

Since February, partly as a result of improvement action taken earlier by senior leaders finally coming to fruition, there has been a change of tempo. The local authority's response to COVID-19 has been positive, proactive and well managed. Despite the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) having to operate virtually, there has been no significant drop-off in its performance. Children in need of help or protection have been seen regularly throughout, as have most children in care and care leavers. Although the quality of practice is still variable, much of it is now more purposeful, more rigorous, more child-focused and more clearly sighted on impact and effectiveness. The local authority's support for the introduction of virtual family courts has helped to mitigate some of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the timeliness of care proceedings. The proportion of audited cases judged by the local authority to be inadequate has fallen significantly.

While there may be room for guarded optimism, senior leaders are under no illusions about the scale of the challenge they still face. In the absence of a clear, coherent and well-coordinated approach to services for children and families on the edge of care, the number of children in care continues to increase year-on-year. The local authority's failure to make best use of the Public Law Outline, and to track pre-proceedings effectively, is also contributing to drift and delay for some children. Short- and long-term placement stability is problematic and means that too many children, most of whom will already have experienced significant adverse childhood experiences before coming into care, are exposed to further disruption and upheaval with all the hurt and distress that entails. Although senior leaders have succeeded in stabilising the workforce, some children are still experiencing too many changes of social workers.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice:

- the use and tracking of pre-proceedings to bring about change effectively and to prevent drift and delay
- services for children and families at the edge of care
- the number and choice of suitable placements for children to meet their needs and reduce the risk of placement disruption
- personal education plans to be more ambitious, specific and measurable.

Findings

- Despite COVID-19, the MASH continues to provide a timely and proportionate response to children and families at the first point of contact, However, the

comparatively high rate of referrals to children's social care suggests a degree of risk aversion and/or a failure on the part of partner agencies to fully understand or consistently apply thresholds.

- Strategy meetings which are, for the most part, well managed and well attended, help to ensure that appropriate action is taken to safeguard and protect children who are at significant risk of harm. In most cases, section 47 enquiries, whether conducted as a single agency or jointly, are completed with minimum delay. However, when it is decided not to proceed by way of an initial child protection conference, the rationale for doing so is not always clearly or explicitly recorded.
- During the pandemic, the local authority has managed to maintain regular contact not just with children in care and care leavers, but also with children who are the subject of child in need or child protection plans. COVID-19 risk assessments have been systematically completed and reviewed. Even during the lockdown, most children were still being seen face to face.
- Run by Gloucestershire's social work academy, the Essentials Programme is starting to make a real difference to the way in which social workers and personal advisers work, think and act. Case summaries are clear, concise, specific and relevant. Child in need, child protection and care plans are all getting sharper. Most are easy to understand. Visits are more purposeful. Multi-agency packages are generally well coordinated.
- The rate of repeat referrals is comparatively high. So too is the proportion of children who are made the subject of a child protection plan for a second or subsequent time. This indicates that children do not always get the right help first time round.
- The quality of frontline management oversight is improving. Although it is not always reflective, social workers are getting regular supervision. However, when risks increase, or children continue to be exposed to unacceptable levels of risk for too long, the local authority does not always take effective action. On occasions, child protection conference chairs have been slow to escalate their concerns.
- Pre-proceedings are not being used effectively to promote change, leaving some children living in risky situations for longer than they should and leading to delays in achieving permanence for others. Although COVID-19 will almost certainly have exacerbated the problem, similar issues and concerns were raised at the time of the last full inspection in 2017.
- When children go missing from home or care, most are offered a return home interview (RHI), but senior leaders recognise that there is room for improvement in the take-up of RHIs, the quality on information gathered and the way in which that information is used. Since taking up her post in February, the new Director of Safeguarding and Care has taken action to tighten up Gloucestershire's response to children who are at risk of sexual or criminal exploitation and to contextual safeguarding generally. There is more work to do.

- The local authority has maintained an appropriate focus on children missing education (CME) during COVID-19, despite some difficulties with schools not completing returns on CME during the lockdown. The local authority's continuing commitment to try to make sure that children who are being electively home educated (EHE) are receiving an appropriate education is clearly evidenced by the rigour of their monitoring arrangements. The local authority is also sensitive to, and keeping a watching brief on, the slight increase in children who are being home educated because of parental concerns about their health conditions which make them particularly vulnerable to COVID-19.
- Too many children come into care in an unplanned way. Recognising that there is an urgent need to strengthen services and support for children on the edge of care, the local authority has invested in additional management capacity at assistant director level.
- Social workers know the children they work with well, including their backstories, and are good at getting under the skin of children's adverse childhood experiences. Children are seen regularly. There are some good examples of purposeful direct work, including life story work, although this has been difficult to sustain during COVID-19.
- Mindful of the importance and significance of family time for children in care, particularly during COVID-19, social workers and their managers have made every effort to ensure that children continue to see and speak regularly with those family members who mean most to them even if, on occasions, this means children having to do so by video link rather than face to face.
- Too many children have experienced repeated changes of social workers, leaving some of them feeling disillusioned and mistrustful, and making it difficult for some of them to build meaningful relationships with their new social workers. Schools are universally complimentary about partnership working with the Virtual School during COVID-19 but find the regular turnover of social workers for children in care a barrier to effective partnership working.
- Most children in care have up-to-date health assessments, thanks largely to the energy and determination of the children in care nursing team and their willingness to offer virtual annual health assessments to children who are not disabled and have no known health issues. Access to dental check-ups for children in care during COVID-19 has been more problematic, partly because the relevant national guidance does not prioritise their needs. Senior leaders have escalated this issue at the appropriate regional level.
- COVID-19 has also put a strain on sources of help and support for children in care and care leavers who are experiencing difficulties with their emotional well-being and mental health, particularly in terms of access to CAMHS. This is the subject of ongoing discussions between senior leaders in children's services and their health partners.
- Although the Virtual School has overseen a fall in fixed-term and permanent exclusions and an improvement in the school attendance of children in care, their outcomes are not good enough in many areas. Attainment and progress at key

stage 4 are significantly below the national average for children in care. This is a major cause for concern. So too is the quality of personal education plans, most of which provide little evidence of meaningful educational targets and do not meet the requirements of the relevant statutory guidance.

- Limited placement options mean that even when children – most of whom will already have experienced significant adverse childhood experiences – do come into care, many of them will be exposed to further upheaval with all the hurt and distress that causes. Limited placement choice is also having an impact on the quality of matching, making it even more difficult to prevent or avoid damaging placement disruptions.
- The decision, by the local authority, to bring the care leavers service back in-house has helped to ensure that the support they receive is much improved. Social workers and personal advisers have demonstrated determination and persistence in trying to make sure that they maintain regular contact with care leavers during the pandemic. Most care leavers have up-to-date pathway plans. However, the percentage of care leavers who are not in employment, education and training has increased during the pandemic.
- Borne out of its experiences with the floods in 2007, the local authority's robust approach to business continuity planning meant that from the very first day of the lockdown 2,000 of its employees, most of them working in children or adult social care, were able to work remotely, with only 25% of them working in local offices at any one time. This has helped to reduce the potential disruption to support and services for children and families.
- Strategic partnerships were reasonably well developed before COVID-19, but the pandemic has served to sharpen senior leaders' focus on, and collective commitment to, shared problem-solving. Cafcass and the judiciary speak very highly of the local authority's support for, contribution to, and financial investment in the development of virtual family courts in Gloucester and Cheltenham.
- High-quality monthly performance management reports which combine an appropriate level of granular detail with rigorous analysis, and clear and unequivocal commentary, help to ensure that senior leaders have a clear line of sight on what is happening at the frontline and, by extension, on the impact this is having on the progress and experiences of children.
- A well-developed quality assurance framework means that senior leaders also have access to accurate, reliable and up-to-date information about the quality of practice on a team-by-team, locality-by-locality basis. Allied to their openness to external challenge, including, for example, the through Partners in Practice programme, this means that senior leaders are better able to forensically target their improvement activity.
- Astute commissioning is undoubtedly having a positive impact on the lives of some children and young people, but a lack of sufficiency in terms of the range and type of placements available for children in care, particularly in an emergency, is a significant problem. Lack of placement choice severely restricts the ability to match children and carers properly and increases the potential for

placement disruption. It also results in the sporadic use by the local authority, when all else fails, of unregistered or unregulated placements, although never without an appropriate level of senior management oversight.

- Impressively, senior leaders have not allowed themselves to be distracted by COVID-19, as evidenced by their decision not to take advantage of the flexibilities made available by the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020, the local authority's response to COVID-19, rather than risk lowering practice standards.
- Staff turnover has fallen, as has the local authority's reliance on agency staff. For their part, social workers have demonstrated considerable resilience during COVID-19, not least in adapting to the challenges associated with remote working. They say they feel, and are being, well supported.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning your next inspection or visit.

Yours sincerely

Nigel Parkes
Her Majesty's Inspector