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Dear Dr Driscoll

Monitoring visit of Worcestershire local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Worcestershire local authority children's services on 8 and 9 January 2019. The visit was the seventh and final monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in November 2016. The visit was conducted by Her Majesty's Inspectors Andrew Waugh and Alison Smale.

The local authority has made some progress in improving services for children and young people who are vulnerable to child sexual exploitation and children and young people who go missing.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors evaluated the local authority's arrangements for the protection of children and young people vulnerable to child sexual exploitation and who go missing from home or care. Inspectors considered other relevant aspects of adolescent vulnerability, including contextual safeguarding.

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

Overview

Since the last inspection in 2016, the local authority has made progress in improving its services for children and young people who are at risk from sexual exploitation and those children and young people who go missing. Children at risk of child sexual exploitation and going missing are proactively worked with in order to identify and reduce risk. No issue of significant harm was identified that had not

been responded to by the local authority. As a result of a more effective approach to children going missing, overall numbers of children going missing and repeat missing episodes have reduced. Social workers know their children well. Reflective supervision is aiding a better understanding of children's lives and vulnerabilities. Consistency of practice and management oversight needs to improve further to ensure that all assessments and plans for vulnerable children at risk of child sexual exploitation and going missing reflect the risks and vulnerabilities and are effective in addressing these.

In other areas of exploitation, including gangs, drugs and county lines, the local authority was able to describe how practice and systems for identification of risk and information-sharing are being developed by the local authority and its partners, but these are not yet fully implemented and utilised.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Social workers know their children and have built trusted and open relationships with them. A social media application is being used to facilitate communication with some children. In most cases, children's views are sought and are valued in day-to-day practice. However, this good practice is not sufficiently embedded and reflected in case recording, written plans or assessments. This is particularly the case where young people are harder to engage with, meaning that some children's lived experiences are not fully represented in written documents that describe their needs or in plans that aim to reduce and minimise existing risks.

Assessments do not fully capture the risks and vulnerabilities experienced by all young people. This means that for some young people there may be risks that are not fully assessed. While child sexual exploitation screening and risk assessment tools are firmly embedded in key documents such as assessments and referrals, the tools are not consistently completed, particularly in referrals. This is a missed opportunity to measure and evaluate risks at the earliest point that could lead to better informed assessments and planning for children. In some cases where child sexual exploitation risk has been identified, corresponding alerts were not on the child's file.

The local authority has increased its workforce capacity to ensure a more effective and timely response when children go missing. The recruitment to three children missing officer posts has increased the number of return home interviews completed, but there are a minority of children who are not receiving a service that is consistent or timely. The return home interviews that are completed are beginning to effectively capture the child's account, as well as intelligence that may be useful in informing future planning and interventions. The outcomes of the interviews are routinely shared between social workers and children missing officers.

Delays in holding multi-agency child exploitation (MACE) meetings mean that concerns and intelligence in relation to child sexual exploitation are not always

effectively shared in a timely way with the multi-agency group, which means that risks cannot be reduced as quickly as they could be.

Care and pathway plans are not always up to date. A minority do not reflect young people's current living arrangements and risk status. Some young people have both pathway and care plans that don't consistently align, and at times this leads to confusion. In a small number of cases, it is positive that social workers are starting to write plans in a way that is accessible for young people. The effectiveness of this approach is variable and in some cases the language used in plans is not young-person friendly and includes too much jargon.

Too many vulnerable young people are not in education, training or employment, which increases their vulnerability. In some cases, risks have been exacerbated by ineffective partnership between schools, colleges and children's social care, resulting in exclusion or loss of education placements. Resolution takes too long and allows risks for vulnerable young people to escalate.

Some foster carers do not have the necessary skills and resilience to care for children who repeatedly go missing. A small number of children have experienced repeated placement breakdown where the carers have not had the skills or resilience to meet their needs and manage risk. The result of this is that a small cohort of children with more complex vulnerabilities experience too many unplanned endings to their placements and are moved to alternative provision without comprehensive matching or preparation taking place. The local authority has been aware of this and has begun work to develop its approach to the management and support of carers and potential placement breakdown. More needs to be done with the small minority of children with complex and challenging behaviours to ensure that this approach achieves greater placement matching and stability.

Partnership working between the police and social workers for children vulnerable to sexual exploitation and going missing is increasingly well developed. Both the police and children's social care have recruited specialist staff to work in this area alongside each other. They are establishing protocols for effectively sharing information. This enables detailed mapping of people of concern who present risks to children, along with locations where children may be exposed to exploitation. Joint operations have been successful in disrupting perpetrators and safeguarding several children. The local authority recognises that children may become vulnerable to other forms of exploitation, for example through gang activity, misuse of drugs or via county lines, and has begun to plan at a strategic level. However, its strategic approach is currently under-developed and needs to be strengthened to ensure that these children are safeguarded effectively.

Social workers value the support they receive from team managers and within their teams. Caseloads for most social workers are manageable and enable social workers to know children they are working with well. Children are seen by their social workers regularly in line with their needs and levels of vulnerabilities. Trusting relationships enable young people to share their lived experiences more

openly. Children with more complex needs benefit from effective co-working arrangements. This means that work is more effectively tailored to the specific needs of the child, and less experienced social workers are partnered with more experienced colleagues to support their professional development.

Management oversight is not as consistently good as it should be and has yet to result in consistently good enough practice by social workers. Case management decisions are not always sufficiently detailed. In a significant minority of cases, inspectors did not see sufficient management challenge to poor social work practice in assessment and plans and when children are not seen within expected timescales.

Supervision is regular and is increasingly reflective, using a strengths-based model of intervention to better understand children's lives and areas of vulnerability. Most managers are beginning to model a more critically evaluative approach that identifies risks and vulnerabilities. Supervision does not always support the progress of children's plans in a timely way and actions are not always followed through at a pace that reflects the needs of the child.

The local authority's approach to and process for case auditing is good. Audits are accurately identifying deficits in practice and are not overly optimistic in their conclusions. In some cases, audits lead to improvement actions for individual case workers and improvements in practice. However, in other cases where audit findings are not followed through and management oversight is weaker, practice remains inconsistent. This results in assessments and plans that are not fully effective.

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

Andy Waugh
Her Majesty's Inspector