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Chris Spencer  
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Dear Mr Spencer,

### **Monitoring visit of Gloucestershire children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Gloucestershire children's services on 15 January 2019. The visit was the fifth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in March 2017. The inspectors were Nicola Bennett, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Steve Lowe, Her Majesty's Inspector.

The local authority has established a permanent senior leadership team and has a clear vision for children's services. It has progressed a number of areas of the refreshed improvement plan. There is strong political commitment to and significant financial investment in children's services. However, significant turnover of staff and social work vacancies continue to impact negatively on the consistency and quality of practice, and the local authority is making insufficient progress in improving services for its children and young people.

### **Areas covered by the visit**

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in a number of key performance areas previously identified as weak, including:

- the voice and experiences of young people in need of help and protection, in care and care leavers including the quality and timeliness of visits and social work interventions to improve their circumstances and outcomes
- the quality of management oversight, challenge and staff supervision
- the accuracy and quality of the performance management information used by senior leaders and managers to oversee practice, and how effectively it is used to improve outcomes for children and young people
- the quality assurance of social work practice through auditing of casework and the contribution it makes to practice improvement.

A range of evidence was considered during this visit, including electronic case records, supervision files and notes, performance data and reports and other information provided by staff and managers. In addition, inspectors spoke to a range of staff, including managers, social workers, parents and young people.

## **Overview**

Too many children referred to Gloucestershire children's services experience delays in being seen by social workers. Although the local authority has made improvements in the timeliness of responses to children in need of help or protection, the quality and consistency of practice is not yet good enough. Young people often experience delay in the identification of, and response to, unchanging or escalating risk, and in the progression of planning within timescales that provide them with the best opportunity to thrive.

While the local authority has been successful in establishing a permanent senior leadership team and a stable frontline team manager group, it continues to struggle to recruit and retain sufficient suitably qualified and experienced social work staff. Due to the high turnover in staff, too many children and young people experience frequent changes of social worker, and this impacts negatively on the progression of plans. However, the vast majority of social workers have manageable caseloads and social workers spoken to during this inspection are positive about working for the local authority, feel supported by line managers and value the visibility and accessibility of senior managers. Social workers and team managers have access to a training and development programme which is supporting them to improve the effectiveness of interventions.

The local authority has an established cycle of audit activity to consider specific areas of practice, as well as individual casework audits which are providing opportunities to identify practice deficits and improvements. While the quality of audits seen on this inspection was good and the majority accurately evaluated children's experiences, recommendations from casework audits are not consistently acted on, and the impact of audits on practice is not yet evident.

The quality of performance management information used by senior leaders and managers to understand and monitor children's experiences is good, and the range is comprehensive. Information provides an accurate picture of the effectiveness of services provided to children, young people and families. The majority of team managers routinely use performance information to ensure compliance with practice standards, such as the timeliness of visits to children, and this has improved as a result. While managers' oversight of practice and staff supervision is now more regular, and there have been improvements in compliance with visiting and assessment timescales, managers do not consistently provide staff with sufficient challenge or direction to identify and address deficits in the quality of practice.

## **Findings and evaluation of progress**

Currently, the local authority experiences significant challenges with recruiting and retaining a permanent workforce, and this continues to impact on opportunities to establish and embed the necessary improvements in practice. High turnover of both agency and permanent staff and a social work vacancy rate of over 30% continue to impact on the timeliness of visits, development of trusting relationships and progression of plans to improve children's lives and outcomes. Over two-thirds of children have experienced a change of social worker in the last six months, 10% of children have had three or more social workers in the past six months and over 80% of children and young people have had three or more social workers during their involvement with children's social care.

In response to these challenges, the local authority has increased its social work establishment in the last six months and implemented its workforce strategy to recruit and retain staff. This includes the recruitment of staff from overseas and effective support for student and newly qualified social workers. In addition, the local authority is progressing plans to establish a social work academy in order to provide learning and development opportunities.

Despite staffing challenges, the local authority has evidenced improvement in a number of key quantitative performance measures. The number of children experiencing delays in being allocated to a social worker are low. The vast majority of single assessments are completed within maximum national timescales of 45 working days. Through effective oversight and use of performance information, the local authority has improved the timeliness and regularity of visits to children assessed to be in need of help or protection, and performance is now much improved: 97% of children in need of protection and 81% of children in need are seen within timescales. However, of significant concern is the high number of children, currently 56%, referred to children's services who do not receive a timely visit to assess their circumstances and ascertain their welfare.

Social work practice for young people in need of help and protection is too variable in quality and consistency. Too many young people continue to live in circumstances where unchanging or increasing risk is not recognised or responded to or where their circumstances are not improving because of ineffective social work. Where young people's needs and risks are clearly identified, inspectors saw evidence of interventions leading to timely improvements in young people's circumstances.

While some social workers are able to talk in detail about the circumstances of the young people with whom they work, this has not consistently translated in to effective or proactive planning. Few social workers give sufficient consideration to the daily lived experiences of the young people and, where young people have younger brothers or sisters, the needs of those siblings often take precedence. Young people's self-reporting is often taken at face value, resulting in an overoptimistic assessment of improvement in their circumstances. For the majority of young people, while visits may be regular, they are not always purposeful or

frequent enough to provide effective support, to ensure that young people are safe or to prevent a deterioration in their circumstances. Frequent changes of social worker mean that young people do not always have the opportunity to develop trusting relationships or the opportunity to be heard.

The vast majority of assessments are now completed within national maximum timescales. Although the quality of assessments is improving, they are not always completed within timescales that reflect young people's circumstances and do not yet contribute to effective planning for young people. Assessments now routinely include consideration of risk and protective factors and historical information, and better examples include a detailed analysis and effectively capture the voice and experiences of young people. However, assessments are not always updated to reflect young people's changed circumstances and specialist assessments are not always undertaken where required in order to inform analysis of risk and inform planning.

Action plans continue to be too variable in their quality and do not consistently inform effective care planning and decision-making. Not all young people have a plan in place and plans are not always updated when young people's circumstances change. Plans do not routinely include timescales and often do not address all risks and needs identified in assessments. As a result, it is difficult to measure whether an action has been achieved or has resulted in an improvement in children's circumstances. Social workers were better able to articulate to inspectors orally what needs to change to improve young people's circumstances, and how progress would be measured, than they record in written plans. Social workers do not, however, consistently recognise unchanging or increasing risk and, as a result, young people remain in circumstances where they continue to experience, or be at risk of, abuse or neglect.

The local authority has increased the number of child protection conference chairs and has introduced a comprehensive improvement programme for this group of staff. These actions have had a demonstrable impact on the timeliness and quality of initial conferences and reviews in considering current risks and needs and reviewing plans. The majority of initial child protection conferences are now held within 15 working days, although performance has not yet reached the local authority's target of 80%. Both initial and review conferences are well attended by agency professionals, and there is a clear analysis of risk and needs. However, chairs are not yet evidencing the difference that they are making in identifying delay and in improving young people's circumstances in a timely way. Core group meetings are now much more regular. However, they do not always progress plans for children. Child in need reviews are not happening consistently. As a result, families are not receiving timely interventions to address identified need. Young people are not consistently engaged or engaged in planning or reviews, which limits the effectiveness and relevance of interventions to young people.

The majority of managers are accessing and effectively using performance information within their teams, and this is improving oversight of compliance with agreed practice standards. Team managers regularly attend service-wide management meetings with senior leaders and increasing numbers have access to management training opportunities. Managers reported to inspectors the positive impact this was having on supporting them in their roles and improving team performance.

Staff morale within teams is good and social workers are positive about the support they receive from managers and the training that they have received to assist them in developing their practice. While social workers report that supervision is regular and reflective, it does not focus sufficiently on weaknesses in practice and does not drive casework with clear timescales for improvement. There continues to be delay in progressing plans and in improving young people's lives, due in part to the changes of social worker experienced by children. Management oversight is not sufficiently rigorous to mitigate these changes.

The range of performance management information and reports used by the senior leadership team to understand and monitor social work practice and performance are comprehensive and provide a clear and accurate picture of performance across the service. Reporting provides an honest and realistic overview of performance, deficits and service developments.

A cycle of auditing of casework is in place. Audits are more consistent in their quality, and accurate in identifying weaknesses in practice and pinpointing where urgent action is required. Actions are being progressed, but inconsistently. Audit activity has, however, yet to demonstrate a consistently positive impact on practice and outcomes for children and young people. Within auditing activity, there are now more opportunities for social workers and managers to reflect on practice, as well as opportunities for parents and children to provide feedback regarding their experiences. However, audits do not routinely consider the overall impact on the young person of interventions or of practice deficits.

The local authority has continued to make incremental improvements. However, the foundations from which to deliver good-quality social work practice are not yet consistently in place and the pace of improvement continues to be too slow.

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

Yours sincerely

Nicola Bennett

**Her Majesty's Inspector**