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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 30 April 2019. The visit was the sixth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in March 2017. The inspectors were Nicola Bennett, HMI, and Diane Partridge, HMI.

The local authority is making slow progress in improving services for its children and young people. The senior leadership team has a clear vision and coherent improvement plan to develop and deliver high-quality services to children and families in Gloucestershire, which it is successfully implementing. While there are early indicators of improvements in some areas of practice, there is considerable variability across teams. Overall, key areas that make a difference to children's lives, such as being seen quickly, being kept safe and developing trusting relationships with social workers, are not yet good enough.

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

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the areas of:

- the quality and timeliness of information gathering and decision-making within the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) within the local authority
- the timeliness of social work visits to see children and ascertain their welfare
- the effectiveness of assessment, planning and interventions for children in need of help and protection
- the quality of management oversight, challenge and staff supervision in these services
- 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

- 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 the visit, including electronic case records, supervision files and notes, observation of staff undertaking referral and assessment duties and other information provided by staff and managers. In addition, we spoke to a range of managers, social workers and other practitioners.

## **Overview**

Despite a number of practice improvements in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH), and although performance is improving, delays in decision-making remain for too many children where there are immediate safeguarding concerns.

The vast majority of children in need of help or protection are seen by their social workers on a regular basis. However, there continue to be delays in seeing children when they are first referred to the local authority, and, as a result, too many children remain in situations of unassessed risk for too long. Where risks to children escalate, or remain unchanged, these are not always recognised or responded to in a timely way.

In recent months, there has been an increase in the number of permanent members of staff within the local authority and a modest reduction in the number of vacant posts. However, too many children continue to experience frequent changes of social workers, and this impacts on the progression of their plans. Caseloads are manageable for the vast majority of social workers, who are positive about working for the local authority and the support they receive to improve children's circumstances.

The local authority has an established cycle of audit activity which identifies practice strengths and deficits in individual casework. Audits accurately evaluate children's experiences. However, recommendations from these audits are not consistently acted on, and the impact of audits on improving practice and children's circumstances is not yet evident.

Performance management information used by senior leaders and managers to understand and monitor children's experiences is of good quality and is comprehensive. The information provides a clear and accurate evaluation of performance, which demonstrates the effectiveness of services provided to children and families. Managers' oversight of practice and staff supervision is now more regular. Despite this, supervision does not consistently provide staff with sufficient challenge or direction to identify and address practice deficits.

## **Findings and evaluation of progress**

The local authority has made progress in recruiting and retaining a permanent workforce, and while the numbers of vacancies and agency staff continue to be high, these have reduced by approximately 10% in the last six months. Senior leaders have made considerable efforts to reduce the turnover of staff. However, this is not yet having a demonstrable impact, and opportunities to embed and sustain the necessary improvements in practice are therefore reduced. Due to the high turnover in staff, over 70% of children have experienced a change of social worker in the last six months.

Since the last monitoring visit, the local authority has maintained or improved a number of key performance measures. The vast majority of assessments are completed within the maximum national timescales of 45 working days, and the number of children experiencing delays in allocation to a social worker remain low. Performance in relation to the timeliness and regularity of visits to children assessed to be in need of help or protection is generally strong, although there is considerable variation across teams. A significant concern remains that only just over half of children referred to children's services receive a timely visit to assess their circumstances and ascertain their welfare. Performance over time is not improving.

Performance in the MASH has improved. The MASH is suitably staffed by experienced social workers and professionals and this is contributing to improvements in timely information-sharing and planning. The majority of referrals to the MASH from professionals are timely and proportionate. However, a high percentage of referrals from the police conclude in no further action for children's social care. This results in considerable additional work for social care staff and delays in children receiving appropriate support that reflects their needs. The local authority is working with Gloucestershire Police to address this.

Within the MASH, thresholds are consistently applied, resulting in children receiving appropriate responses to their needs, and managers provide regular oversight and direction to social workers. Consent is appropriately sought from parents. Information from partner agencies is routinely gathered to inform assessment of risk and decision-making, which, in the majority of cases, is made within 24 hours. However, where risks to children are more acute, and therefore more urgent assessment is required, there continue to be delays in decision-making regarding the next course of action.

The vast majority of strategy discussions to consider risk to children and plan protective action now take place within the local authority timescale of five working days. There is good multi-agency attendance and effective information-sharing and risk assessment to inform decision-making. Increasingly, strategy meetings include timescales for completing actions. However, a high proportion of children are not seen with sufficient urgency as part of child protection enquiries. As a result, children continue to be left for too long in situations of unassessed risk. While this is an area of focus for the local authority, performance is not improving.

Social work practice within the assessment and safeguarding service varies in quality and consistency. Some practitioners plan and provide purposeful and effective social work practice which leads to improved outcomes for children. However, too many children continue to live in circumstances where unchanging or increasing risk is not recognised or responded to, or where their circumstances are not improving. This is due to changes of social worker, absence of clear planning and lack of management grip.

Most social workers spoken to are able to talk about the circumstances of the children with whom they work. This knowledge does not consistently translate into effective planning. Not all social workers give sufficient consideration to children's daily lived experiences. However, where regular, purposeful visiting and direct work is undertaken by social workers, children's circumstances improve.

The majority of assessments are completed within national maximum timescales and are more consistent in their consideration of risk and protective factors and historical information, as well as detailed analysis. Increasingly, assessments capture the views and experiences of children, although these are not consistently reflected in analysis of risk, need and service provision. Assessments are not always completed within timescales that reflect children's circumstances. They do not always include up-to-date information from agency professionals and do not yet consistently contribute to effective planning.

Plans are too variable in their quality, and actions do not consistently inform effective care planning and decision-making. Although an increasing number of plans include timescales, this is not widely embedded, particularly for children in need. The rationale for decision-making and interventions is not always consistently clear. It is difficult to measure whether an action has been achieved or has resulted in an improvement in children's circumstances. Although the quality of contingency planning is improving, these plans are not always implemented, and, as a result, are not effective.

Although the vast majority of children in need have a plan, review meetings are not happening consistently, leading to delays in addressing identified needs and improving children's circumstances. The timeliness of initial child protection conferences has deteriorated since the last monitoring visit. In March, just over half of initial conferences were held within 15 working days. While the majority of conferences are well attended by professionals, with clear analysis of risk and needs, the application of thresholds and identification of drift and delay by child protection chairs is not consistent. As a result of this, some children continue to live for too long in situations of neglect and abuse. Core group meetings are now much more regular, but do not always progress plans for children. Professionals do not consistently contribute to effective planning or escalate concerns to ensure timely improvements in children's circumstances. The views of children and young people are not routinely represented at child protection meetings and, where young people are not consistently engaged, the effectiveness of interventions is reduced.

Morale within teams is good. Social workers are positive about the support they receive from line managers and the visibility and responsiveness of senior leaders. Social workers particularly value the range of learning opportunities available to assist them in developing their skills. While supervision is now more regular, it is not sufficiently focused on identifying and addressing weakness in practice. Management oversight is not yet sufficiently rigorous or challenging to ensure that children's circumstances are improving within reasonable timescales.

Casework audits have improved in quality, and now accurately identify strengths and weaknesses in practice. While actions are identified to address practice deficits, they often lack sufficient urgency to progress. Social workers and managers are now regularly involved in casework auditing, which provides them with opportunities to reflect on practice. Increasingly, parents and children are invited to provide feedback regarding their experiences. Audit activity has, however, yet to demonstrate a consistently positive impact on practice and outcomes for children and young people.

The range of performance management information and reports available to the senior leadership team is comprehensive and provides a clear and accurate picture of performance across the service. Senior leaders have good oversight and understanding of practice strengths and deficits and effectively utilise performance information to inform service planning and developments. Implementation of the local authority improvement plan demonstrates recent impact on establishing a permanent, suitably qualified workforce and improved performance in a number of quantitative, as well as qualitative, performance measures.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Nicola Bennett  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**