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Dear Darryl

### **Monitoring visit to Herefordshire County Council children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Herefordshire County Council children's services on 29 to 30 March 2023. This was the first monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in July 2022. His Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Alison Smale and Tom Anthony.

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

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the following areas of concern identified at the last inspection:

- Early help provided by the local authority.
- The multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH).
- Assessments undertaken by the assessment service.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

#### **Headline findings**

Since the last inspection when services were judged to be inadequate, protective responses through the MASH have been improved, meaning that most children's needs are now promptly identified and responded to at the point when referrals and contacts are made. This has been achieved through increased capacity, and partnership changes, combined with clear and helpful management oversight. However, for vulnerable children and families, the impact of this is limited as they experience poorer practice once allocated to a social worker for assessment. Once assessments are completed, workforce churn remains an issue and prevents timely allocation for some children for whom longer term intervention is needed. Leaders understand the scale of improvement and have started to implement a

comprehensive improvement plan. Some evidence of improvement has been seen in this monitoring visit, but the pace of improvement in some areas is too protracted.

### **Findings and evaluation of progress**

The interface between early help and the MASH has been strengthened. The children's help and advice team has relaunched the early help telephone line. The team provides a timely and helpful advice service, signposting families promptly to universal and targeted services, making sure that children and families receive the help they need before needs escalate. Once referred for early help, children and families can wait for up to a month before early help is provided. Management oversight is in place for those children and families. This ensures that if children's needs escalate during this period or they have been stepped down from social care, they are prioritised for earlier allocation.

Children and families with lower-level needs are supported well once they are allocated to family support workers in the early help service who can support families to receive a range of helpful interventions which make a positive difference. Early help workers are agile in the support they provide, visiting at higher frequency when children require this. Positive use of direct work helps children understand their experiences and convey their wishes and feelings.

Since the last inspection, the functioning of the MASH has significantly improved from a very low base, meaning that most children's needs are now promptly identified and responded to when referrals and contacts are made. Effective systems have been established along with increased capacity to gather the information required to decide what is the right level of support to offer children and families.

Parental consent for agency checks are routinely gained. Appropriate consideration is given to historical information, strengthened by the co-location of key partners in the MASH, which enables timely analysis and recommendations. Responses are accelerated, based on a priority rating which is upgraded when emerging information makes it clear that children may be at greater risk. Children's needs are sufficiently understood at this stage to inform decisions on next steps or what actions are needed to help them. Effort is made to speak with parents, including absent fathers and partners. This enables a fuller understanding of the needs of the child or children.

Management oversight of frontline practice in the MASH is evident, with clear evaluation and rationale for decisions at key stages. Social workers in the MASH are given clear direction so that they know what work is needed and the pace that is required to gain a fuller understanding of children's experiences. Most referrals are completed within agreed timescales and systems are in place to enable managers to track timescales. Managers override timescales in only a small number of cases

where some additional information or input may resolve the situation or enable a more informed decision.

Exploitation risks are recognised in the MASH. Workers in the MASH are alert to potential neglect concerns. Return home interviews when children are missing from home are used well to enhance plans to help keep children safe and enable an effective response if they go missing again. Children benefit from the opportunity to build relationships with workers with whom they have had consistent contact within the specialist Get Safe team, whose members are able to support children to access services and opportunities and reduce the pull of exploitative adults.

Children who require support and protection out of hours receive a timely and thorough response from the commissioned emergency duty service. When there are concerns about children facing significant harm, these staff are knowledgeable and skilled at undertaking strategy meetings, and they liaise with other agencies to develop appropriate safety plans for children.

When children are at risk of immediate significant harm, multi-agency strategy meetings within the MASH are held promptly. Managers in the MASH chair all strategy meetings, which provides oversight and understanding of the most vulnerable children, which, in turn, informs immediate planning to safeguard children. Strengthened relationships with the police and Operation Encompass have improved the identification of children experiencing domestic abuse in their families, resulting in a proportionate response.

Safety planning within strategy meetings is limited to immediate safety and there is an over-reliance on police action in order to prevent alleged perpetrators from having access to children and adult victims. There is insufficient consideration of future risk and how this can best be mitigated in the longer term, when police action such as bail conditions expire.

Once children are allocated for an assessment, practice quality within the assessment service varies considerably. Most assessments in Herefordshire continue to be of poor quality and are not sufficiently effective. This means that children's needs and risks are not sufficiently identified within assessments and some children do not have an adequate response to meeting their needs. Changes of worker and a lack of management oversight and grip mean some children don't receive the level of support and security they need during the assessment process. A minority of assessments are stronger, and some children and families receive services that start to make a positive difference while the assessment is taking place. Services are available and some social workers refer during the assessment to make sure families get the help they need, but this is not consistent across the majority of teams.

Management oversight of assessment practice in most instances is not sufficiently robust. Most managers do not provide critically evaluative oversight, and thresholds

are not consistently applied, including decisions about whether children are at risk of significant harm. Most management oversight and supervision does not consider alternatives or contingencies and affords too little or only partial rationale for decision-making.

Managers give insufficient weight to chronic patterns of concern. Decisions do not take into account that previous practice and decision-making involving children in Herefordshire should be seen in the light of potentially inadequate and unsafe practice. For some families, particularly those for whom there are long-standing concerns relating to domestic abuse, neglect, and substance misuse, decision-making is over optimistic and based on short-term gains during the assessment period. Many of these assessments are characterised by a lack of professional curiosity, not listening to children about their lived experience, minimisation of risks often based on verbal reassurances from the adults caring for children and missing potential disguised compliance. As a result, too many children are closed to the service prematurely and re-referred within a short period for similar reasons or because partners lack confidence. Families experience repeat assessments and children's needs can escalate as they are not met as soon as they could be.

For a small minority of children whose needs were being assessed, stronger management oversight was seen, with evaluations and guidance written by the manager to the child. Where management oversight was stronger, the manager provides helpful direction at the point of allocation and at key points during the assessment, to check progress. When this happens, it reduces drift and delay and enables forward planning if children are likely to need longer term support.

For too many children, their views and experiences are not sufficiently well understood, or opportunities are not made to listen to them during assessment work. There are early signs of a small number of social workers who have had training which has resulted in stronger child-focused assessment practice, enabling children to talk safely about their experiences and providing powerful accounts which inform assessments and plans. They write the assessments to the child, making communication clearer and more child focused. But this is a small minority.

Leaders in Herefordshire are determined and committed to improve services in Herefordshire. The chief executive and director of children's services, along with other senior leaders understand the scale of change based on a realistic self-evaluation. A systematic approach to improvement is being implemented. Leadership capacity and governance has been enhanced by utilising additional resources and a commitment from leaders across the council. Leaders are now more outward looking, proactively learning from better practice within the wider sector nationally. The pace of change within the service is not yet sufficient. Leaders acknowledged the service took too long to transition to face-to-face working following more remote working enough to record as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders know they need to improve the recording system, which does not support staff to record well. Helpful

training is now starting to improve the practice of some social workers, but leaders know more needs to be done to develop good social work practice.

A strengthened and more robust approach to understanding the quality of services for children has been implemented, with a new quality assurance programme, which is becoming increasingly well embedded. This is providing senior managers with a more accurate view of practice quality across the service. This is now being further strengthened through child and parent carer feedback. Performance management systems have been strengthened with senior managers, leaders and partners provided with helpful performance reports, enabling more effective scrutiny and challenge arrangements in key internal and partnership-based forums.

A range of strategies and guidance documents have been written at pace which set out a shared vision and guidance to staff and partners. The quality and quantity of some documents mean that they are not all sufficiently clear which could result in confusion.

Staff like working in Herefordshire but there remain considerable issues with high turnover which continue to impact on service quality. Staff are positive about the changes implemented by senior managers and can see the benefits in terms of capacity, improved staff stability, workload and process. It is positive that staff have been consulted and involved in some of these changes. Senior leaders are visible and create opportunities to listen to staff and take action as a result to improve the service. Staff are positive about development opportunities.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. As this is the first monitoring visit to your local authority, we will not publish this letter on the Ofsted website. You may share this letter with others if you wish.

Yours sincerely

Alison Smale  
His Majesty's Inspector