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Dear Tina

Monitoring visit to Herefordshire children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Herefordshire children's services on 22 and 23 October 2024. This was the fifth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in July 2022. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Alison Smale and Ceri Evans.

Areas covered by the visit

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

- The protection of vulnerable children from extra-familial risk.

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

Headline findings

Since the last monitoring visit in February 2024, a new interim director of children's services (DCS) has been appointed, who has brought renewed focus to areas of the service which need to improve. A refreshed improvement plan is being implemented and there are some early signs of improvement.

Children at risk of extra-familial harm in Herefordshire benefit from a committed specialist team which reduces risks for many of these very vulnerable children. These risks include child exploitation, going missing from home or care and the risks associated with gangs, radicalisation, trafficking and modern slavery. The Get Safe team works effectively and reduces risks for many children who are vulnerable to or at risk of exploitation and other forms of extra-familial harm. Most work is timely and well structured. The team forms lasting and trusting relationships with children, some of whom maintain contact after they are closed to the team. The quality of these relationships serves as a positive foundation, and risks reduce for many

children. Interpreters are appropriately used with children and families, which helps facilitate discussion in visits and direct work where English is not the first language.

Most children vulnerable to exploitation risks who come to the attention of children's services are promptly identified. For these vulnerable children, collaboration and timely information-sharing between partners has improved, which is helping to protect vulnerable children through targeted interventions and/or disruption activity. However, a small number of children with very complex needs, many of whom the local authority has been involved with for a long time, experience delays in effective intervention, particularly when they cannot safely be cared for at home and there is continued difficulty in sustaining the right placement and keeping them safe.

Findings and evaluation of progress

A range of early help services support children at risk of exploitation. The specialist Get Safe team works alongside early help workers, which ensures a well-coordinated approach to intervention. Clear parameters are set for the required work, which enables a coordinated approach about how best to support the child.

The Get Safe team is based in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) which receives referrals to children's services. Effective systems are in place to ensure prompt screening and allocation of new referrals relating to children at risk of harm outside of their family to the Get Safe team.

Multi-agency child exploitation (MACE) meetings provide a structured, embedded approach to multi-disciplinary analysis and evaluation. A collaborative approach to risk management leads to reliable decisions about next steps. At the initial MACE meeting, which decides whether the Get Safe team will become involved, the opportunity is missed to involve children and their family at the earliest opportunity. It is not sufficiently clear why they are not invited or asked for their consent. Children and their families are encouraged to attend subsequent MACE meetings, which increases their understanding and ownership of planned intervention. For children who are not subject to MACE review, closure decision-making is less strong. It is not consistently clear what actions and interventions remain in place to support and sustain progress already made to reduce risks for the child.

Most Get Safe risk assessments relating to risks outside of the family are clear and comprehensive. They utilise a wide range of multi-disciplinary information and intelligence, which is reviewed through regular MACE meetings. This means risks for children are mostly well understood, leading to effective protective action and support. Alongside the allocated social worker and multi-disciplinary partners, the Get Safe team considers the level of risk and what action is needed to best support the child.

Child and family assessments and plans completed in other parts of the service in recent months are of improved quality. Most assessments are detailed and reflect

children's overarching needs. They include an exploration of the current risk and level of need. For the vast majority of children, they are updated when circumstances change. For a small minority this is not the case, particularly for children in care with more complex needs, who have experienced placement disruption and unplanned change. A very small number of children in care are placed a long way from home or have experienced significant placement change. Delay and disruption to their needs being met means that their risks are not sufficiently well managed.

Children's risk management plans vary in quality. Some are formulaic and not tailored sufficiently to the particular child's circumstances. Staff are able to talk about how they tailor these plans in practice, but this stronger practice is not sufficiently reflected in these documents.

Children are able to access some helpful specialist support services to address issues which contribute to their vulnerability. While some children in care and care leavers benefit from activities including sport and exercise, for others there is little evidence of support to engage in physical and social activities that could enhance their lives and help address mental health and isolation.

Across the service, management oversight and supervision of social workers and personal advisers continues to need improvement. Most supervision is regular and the proportion of permanent managers has increased. Supervision does not effectively address drift or ensure that actions are progressed to improve children's circumstances.

The continued turnover of social workers means that some children experience too many changes of social worker. While this is starting to improve, the amount of change in these important relationships, experienced by some children who already have great difficulties with trust, has a negative impact on their capacity to form meaningful relationships with their social workers. Children are engaged in planning and assessment, but their voices are not consistently reflected authentically in documents.

Children who go missing from home or care are offered return home interviews. Leaders have started to address the need to improve the take up of these interviews, which they recognise remains too low. When return home interviews are completed, they are timely and completed in a way which makes the child feel comfortable. Most return home interviews explore risks and factors influencing risk, but some lack sufficient professional curiosity to fully understand risks.

A significant focus on improving performance management is enabling leaders to understand the areas that have started to improve and where further improvement is needed to ensure that developments are embedded with continued pace and momentum.

The effectiveness of the approach to quality assurance remains limited. The audit programme was recently reset. Revised judgement guidelines have resulted in a more accurate understanding of practice quality. Audits are now being moderated, but this is not being done in a way which consistently provides a reflective commentary to aid learning. It is positive that auditors consult with workers and parents, but the engagement of children remains under-developed.

Staff are consistently positive about the leadership of both the new DCS and wider senior managers. They report a sense of an improving service. Staff like working in Herefordshire and are positive about the range of suitable training and development opportunities. Caseloads are manageable, and staff recognise that their workloads have started to reduce, enabling them to see children more often. They feel well supported and are positive about the recent changes and feel that the service is changing for the 'better'. They feel that there is a 'drive to improve' and that this is shared across the workforce. They report a visible and approachable leadership in recent months that seeks the views of staff, meaning that they feel invested in and listened to.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Alison Smale
His Majesty's Inspector