

20 March 2025

Tina Russell
Corporate Director of Children's Services (Interim)
Children's Services
Plough Lane
Hereford
HR4 OLE

Dear Tina

Monitoring visit to Herefordshire children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Herefordshire County Council children's services on 18 to 19 February 2025. This is the sixth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in July 2022. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Alison Smale and Rebecca Quested.

Areas covered by the visit

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

- child protection enquiries, such as strategy discussions or section 47 enquiries
- emergency action – liaison with police to use powers of protection or applications for an emergency protection order
- child-in-need assessments
- decisions to accommodate children during an initial assessment
- step-up from and step-down to early help.

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 October 2024, the local authority has started to build up some pace in the improvement of services for vulnerable children. Strategically, leaders are beginning to establish the foundations for stronger practice and are achieving greater consistency in the quality of practice of their assessment teams. The implementation of the Herefordshire Children's Services and Partnership Improvement Plan is making progress. A move to locality-based working has been successfully initiated, and this is showing early signs of the benefits of improved working with families and children, as well as partnership working. The teams whose

members undertake assessments following referral to children's social care and provide support for children in need have recently moved to three localities within the county. This is the first phase of the implementation of the Families First Partnership programme.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Timely completion of assessments and support provided by social workers and family support workers in the assessment and support teams have a positive impact, which enables the majority of children and their families to progress in having their needs met. Re-referral rates have recently increased. A small cohort, particularly of older children with more complex needs, have been referred previously to the local authority. Opportunities have been missed to identify and understand their needs at the earliest opportunity.

Thresholds are appropriately applied, and this informs decisions about the level of intervention. Most assessments are comprehensive and provide an evaluation of children's needs. Written assessments are not usually addressed to children. Many assessments are unnecessarily lengthy and repetitive. This means they can be quite difficult to read. Leaders accept the need to review the assessment format and develop the way social workers write to children and families to ensure they are easier for them to understand.

Decisions and recommendations to meet the needs of children are clearly thought through with a clear rationale. Family history and patterns of intervention are considered in assessments.

Social workers understand the authority's social work model to work with families, and they are cognisant of issues such as disguised compliance when working with parents who may appear to cooperate but who behave in ways which undermine the effectiveness of this work. Children's ethnicity is considered to help understand their lived experiences and needs. However, family identities are not consistently recorded, which leads to some misleading ethnicity records, particularly for mixed heritage and Romany children.

The views of partner agencies are captured in addition to those of parents and children in most assessments. A range of professionals and agencies are involved, and they make an important contribution to assessments as well as provide the support which families need. This includes the constructive use of the edge of care service to support families where relationships are strained, as well as other targeted and specialist services. Family support workers in assessment teams play a valuable role with families, which both contributes towards the completion of the assessment and supports families.

Safeguarding concerns that emerge during an assessment are responded to with timely strategy meetings, which are appropriately held to consider the risk of harm to children. They are well attended by multi-agency partners. This ensures information

is shared effectively and decisions are made together by those who know the family and child, to protect children. For the very small number of children who become looked after during assessments, this is done in their best interests and to protect them from further harm.

Social workers undertake thorough section 47 enquires to fully understand the risks to children. Parents and children are seen quickly so that initial safety planning can be agreed. Safety plans are written down and shared with families, which ensures that there is a shared understanding of how children's needs can be safely met. While partnership working for many families is improving their circumstances, some barriers to partnership are still evident in a small proportion of cases. This slows progress for a minority of children, such as children who miss education for too long, without assessment of their learning needs, which is critical to their needs being met. Leaders have addressed the issue that police do not always give sufficient priority to joint section 47 child protection investigations or are not sufficiently forthcoming to assist in some instances, for example where their help might ensure the safety of social work staff. However, the results of leaders' management of this issue have not yet had an impact.

Many social workers develop relationships with parents and children in a skilled way. As a result, parents are supported to understand the concerns about their children. Social workers themselves, or family support workers in their teams, use the period of assessment to undertake direct work with children and families to improve their understanding and to start to support parents to address their children's needs or risks.

Leaders have strengthened the approach to pre-birth assessment and decision-making. This follows a focused audit of this area of work and the implementation of awareness raising to improve practice and stronger management oversight. Practice in relation to pre-birth assessments had been inconsistent over recent months, but more recently practice is more effective, with more thorough assessments, timely decision-making and support to ensure that these very vulnerable children are supported to live with their parents where possible.

Identification of young carers has increased over the last year, and the local authority is now supporting more young carers through dedicated early help workers. These assessments are comprehensive and child focused. They advocate and support young carers to get the right services and they support families to understand their needs. There is a group for young carers in Hereford, which provides them with social activities and support. Other young carer groups have been closed, which means many of these children are unable able to attend.

Leaders are now making some tangible progress to improve the quality and consistency of practice within their assessment teams. The Chief Executive has established a Partnership Executive Group, which is beginning to deliver increased commitment from health and the police. A stronger understanding and commitment

across the council to children who need the support of children's social care is reflected in corporate plans and priorities.

Senior leaders are learning more meaningfully from external peers, which is leading to demonstrable changes, such as a commitment to being a child-friendly Hereford and the start of the long-awaited management development programme. Nearly all managers are now permanent, providing a firmer foundation to achieve consistent practice. While a greater and increasing proportion of the workforce are now permanent, this remains a significant challenge to embedding changes in order to achieve sustained improvement.

Changes to the structure, revised policies and procedures, and the strengthening of quality assurance have been well implemented by the interim director of children's services (DCS) and the leadership team. Social workers are positive about the changes implemented by leaders in recent months to the structure, and they have valued the consultation and opportunities to influence these changes ahead of their implementation. Prior to these changes, there was a period of instability within the assessment teams, with higher caseloads and a backlog of assessments due to staff vacancies. Since the restructure, and the recruitment of new staff, this has stabilised. The newness of these changes means there has not yet been sufficient time to test their sustainability.

A wider breadth of quality assurance activity gives leaders a stronger line of sight on the quality of practice. This includes a broader range of targeted audits on areas of service or cohorts of children who are more vulnerable. Feedback from children and parents is much more embedded into audits, which provides more meaningful insight into the experience and impact of practice for those who receive support from children's services. Audits identify issues to improve the service as well as more practice improvement, but some are lengthy and not sufficiently clear about the key findings. A minority of audits are over optimistic in their evaluation of practice, and the moderation process is not fully effective.

The Management and Leadership programme for Service Managers is currently underway but at an early stage of implementation. Leaders are aware of the need to ensure that front line team managers have this training without delay, and implementation plans are in development. Most social workers in the assessment teams receive regular supervision, and mechanisms have been put in place to track the completion of assessments and ensure regular management oversight. The quality of supervision in this part of the service continues to vary, but, overall, a higher proportion of supervision provides some critical reflection and direction that progresses work with the children and their families.

Social workers are positive about the learning offer. It provides a range of training opportunities which supports their practice with children and families but does not include specific assessment training, which is a gap. Newly qualified social workers are well supported, which enables them to develop their confidence in their social work practice. Social workers enjoy working in Herefordshire. While there remains a

high proportion of agency social workers, reliance on agency staff has reduced and increasingly they work in Herefordshire for a longer time. Social workers feel well supported by their immediate line managers, their colleagues and leaders.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Alison Smale
His Majesty's Inspector