

17 July 2025

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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 17 and 18 June 2025. This was the seventh monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in July 2022. His Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Alison Smale, Tom Anthony and Sally Sinclair.

Areas covered by the visit

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

- The quality of matching, placement and decision-making for children in care.
- The experiences and progress of children in care.

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

Headline findings

The quality of practice for children in care in Herefordshire has improved at pace since the last monitoring visit which focused on children in care, in early 2024, and where little progress was found. Over the last year, following the appointment of a new interim director of children's services, leaders and senior managers have worked with fresh momentum and conviction to create the conditions for social work to flourish. Consistently stronger child-focused practice is improving the experience and outcomes for children in care in Herefordshire. The consistent moderation of practice audits, to ensure reliable evaluation of practice, and the development of timely education provision for older children who are separated from their families and seeking asylum remain areas for improvement.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Children in care benefit from social workers who know them well. Social workers visit children regularly and at a frequency tailored to their needs. Social workers carry out thoughtful and purposeful direct work with children to understand their experiences and views. They take time to build trusting relationships with children which enable them to make progress.

Regular looked-after children reviews and updated assessments help practitioners to understand and meet children's needs. Children are made aware of their right to have an advocate. They are supported to take up this offer, which helps them to effectively convey their wishes and views about decisions which are important to their lives, and to access the right services. Wider support is well embedded. Children know their independent reviewing officer (IRO), who maintains close oversight between reviews of any changes in the child's circumstances and ensures ongoing progress. The offer to children in care is enhanced through specific practical support from family support workers and virtual school officers.

Recent records show that social workers are writing records to children in a language which is easier to understand. More recent records, such as social work reports and assessments, are informative, reflect the wishes and feelings of children and are clearer about the rationale for decisions. Letters are sent to children to update them following reviews, but also about other matters which may interest them. These help children to understand, both now and in the future, important decisions made.

When there are concerns about children's well-being or safety, timely and effective action is taken to address them. Strategy meetings are swiftly convened when there are concerns about significant harm. These are well attended and enable the exchange of information. Multi-agency threshold decision-making and agreements result in effective action to safeguard these children.

Children's plans are holistic and address the range of each child's needs. They evidence timely decision-making and purposeful intervention. Insufficient attention is given to children's identity in assessment and planning, which means that specific cultural needs are not fully considered.

Most supervision is regular, reflective and purposeful, supporting progress for children in care and staff development. Regular management oversight provides a strong link to planning, which ensures actions to improve children's lives are tracked and adapted when needed. As a consequence, children in care make progress. Their needs are met, or changes are made to plans when new needs emerge or actions do not have the desired effect.

The placement and care of children who are separated from their families and seeking asylum have improved and children receive a sensitive and timely response while in care. Care plans are tailored to their needs in a culturally sensitive way and care is taken to welcome them to Herefordshire, including giving them individually considered care packs which may include items such as prayer mats and a Qur'an, depending on their specific cultural needs.

Children's health needs are well met. Assessments and looked after reviews ensure that children's needs are assessed and that they receive medical support when needed. The emotional well-being of children is well considered. Social workers work well with care placement providers and child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) to ensure that children receive the right support at the earliest opportunity. There are some delays for a small number of children, particularly for those placed out of area. Leaders are aware of this and have taken action to increase capacity by employing a child psychologist, but it is too soon to evaluate the impact.

Children in care are supported to improve their educational attainment. They receive additional support through their personal education plans (PEPs) and the support of the virtual school when this is needed. The virtual school is actively involved in children's reviews and PEPs are considered, which ensure that children get the right support to improve their achievement in school. An exception to this is for children who are separated from their families and seeking asylum. While there have been improvements and some provision is now available, this remains underdeveloped, resulting in delay, particularly for older children in care. This means that these children often do not receive sufficient education at the earliest opportunity. This can add to their isolation and delay their education and integration.

Children benefit in having their needs met through stable placements and carers who care about them. Careful consideration is given to find the right placement, including keeping brothers and sisters together whenever this is in their best interests. Specific needs are identified and plans tailored as part of each child's package of care, which is leading to greater placement stability. When in their best interests, early consideration and effective support are provided to enable family members to care for children. This means many children are well cared for within their family or wider network.

A small number of children experience disruption in their placement. Stability meetings are convened and good communication and negotiation with carers often result in positive outcomes, either to continue the placement or extend it until a well-matched placement can be found. Robust systems are in place and good relationships with providers mean the use of unregistered placements in Herefordshire is rare. When these are used, it is only for short periods, with strong management oversight to assure managers that children are being safeguarded.

Stability and permanence for children are well planned. Early identification and proactive approaches to secure permanence mean children benefit from timely decisions and arrangements that provide them with a sense of security and permanence. Managers and practitioners demonstrate a shared ambition and reflective practice which contributes to safer and better-informed long-term outcomes for children in Herefordshire.

Performance management reporting systems and quality assurance are increasingly robust, with further work continuing to strengthen them further. Managers are becoming more precise in recognising indicators that help them to understand the effectiveness of practice and support practice improvement. Quality assurance activity is now well embedded, which enables stronger oversight and timely intervention. Although it provides a better understanding of the quality of practice, which managers and leaders are using to make further improvements, there remains some over-optimism in audits by specific managers, due to limited moderation by senior managers.

Workforce stability has improved. The implementation of a refreshed and enhanced recruitment and retention strategy is creating a much more stable workforce to support children in care. There is now a much higher proportion of permanent social workers and turnover has notably decreased, which means most children in care have had the same social worker over the last year. The resetting of the local authority's offer to social workers and the 'grow your own' approach are now clear strengths, and are starting to make a tangible difference for children in care. Staff benefit from well-structured development pathways, including apprenticeships and transitions from student placements through to practitioner roles.

Social workers consistently speak well of senior managers and are positive about the changes made to improve the service. Staff feel they have been proactively involved in changes and their views valued as part of the management of change. An increasingly strong learning culture is embedded across the organisation. Social workers benefit from a training offer which is developing their professional practice skills. In addition to core training, social workers are supported to take up a range of training and development opportunities which are tailored to their needs. The effectiveness of this can be directly seen in the improvement in social work practice and improved outcomes for children in care.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Alison Smale
His Majesty's Inspector