

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231
Textphone 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Melissa Caslake
Director of Children's Services
Devon County Council
County Hall
Topsham Road
Exeter
Devon
EX2 4QD

Dear Melissa

Monitoring visit to Devon children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Devon children's services on 21 June 2022. The visit was the third monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in January 2020. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Tracey Ledder and Steve Lowe.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the quality of services for children subject to child in need and child protection plans. Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the following areas of concern identified at the last inspection:

- Making sure that children receive the right help and support they need, when they need it.
- Making sure that children's plans are effective and make a difference.
- The effectiveness of leadership, including the quality of recorded management oversight and critical challenge.

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

Headline findings

Children in need of support and/or protection do not yet receive a significantly better service than at the point of the last inspection. The local authority has not acted quickly enough to make the changes required and the pace of change remains too slow.

Following the local authority securing a permanent children's services senior leadership team in the autumn of 2021, there is a more cohesive, systematic and

determined approach to doing what is needed to achieve the necessary progress. Importantly, this is now backed by political and corporate leaders, who have committed additional resources to tackling the weaknesses in children's services. Although the local authority has now begun to take steps to drive progress, such as beginning to increase capacity so that social workers can spend more time with individual children, such measures are at an early stage and so their impact is limited. Despite limited progress to date, this new, more joined-up and better resourced approach is an important pre-condition for future progress, and most staff are positive about the senior leadership team's improvement plans.

Workforce stability and capacity continue to be a problem. This often means several changes of social worker for children. This is compounded by weaknesses in children's records, and social workers cannot always quickly grasp key risks and challenges for children. As a result, there is a lack of focus on what needs to happen. Consequently, things do not change quickly enough for children and their families. Leaders have taken appropriate action to address challenges with recruitment and retention; however, at this point in time, the impact is limited.

Findings and evaluation of progress

The quality of work with children subject to child in need and child protection plans is variable but the majority remains poor, and this has an impact on children's experiences. Children are not always getting the right help and support they need at the right time. A lot of this is due to children experiencing repeat interventions over many years which do not have a sustainable impact. Inspectors have seen some very recent examples of stronger practice. For these children, social workers have identified creative ways to engage them, and social work involvement is starting to have a positive impact.

Children's plans do not always reflect the needs identified by their assessments. Understanding and interpretation of children's views, wishes and feelings remain predominantly weak, and their journey and experiences can be hard to understand. Contingency planning for children is not good enough. It is unclear what needs to happen for children in an emergency. Cultural and identity needs are not always given enough consideration. This means that social workers do not always fully understand what life is like for children and their families.

Child protection chairs are not having a sufficient impact on driving up the quality of practice with children. Mostly, their impact is hard to see because it lacks challenge and action when things are not changing for children. More recent initiatives, such as mid-point reviews of care plans and strengthened follow-up, are starting to have an impact for some children.

There is a delay in initiating pre-proceedings for children assessed as being at risk. Although work with some children and families is timely and effective, for too many children, plans are delayed, and children end up having interventions over several years that do not achieve change. Likewise, planning for unborn babies is

inconsistent. In the few stronger examples seen, social workers ensure that assessments are completed in a timely way, and parents understand what needs to happen for legal applications to be avoided.

The introduction of two court progression officers has brought much-needed oversight to pre-proceedings. They are working with social workers and leaders to continue to strengthen practice. Social workers have been provided with training to help them to better understand the legal frameworks and expectations. These systems are starting to improve timeliness for some children. The quality of letters before proceedings is variable. Some still lack sufficient focus on working alongside families. The language in letters before proceedings is not sufficiently clear and accessible for families and the sometimes negative tone is not in line with the local authority's restorative practice model.

Basing social workers in schools is a positive initiative. The role of these social workers is continuing to develop, and some children and families benefit from these arrangements. Children can get help and advice more quickly and build a stronger relationship with their social worker. Relationships between education partners and social workers are more collaborative and this has a positive impact for children. For one child, this meant that their school was better able to advocate for them while the relationship with the social worker was developing. However, the role of the social worker in schools is not yet fully established, for example when children are being excluded from school. Social work involvement is not being used to add value and bring a focus on risk and need in this area of schools' work.

Generally, social workers who work with disabled children know them and their families well. Thresholds are applied well and reflect children's levels of need and risk. There is a strong focus on working alongside parents to help understand their pressures and to identify support that will help them to parent children with often complex needs.

When specialist services are involved, children's outcomes are better. The new child mental health specialist, restorative practice coaches and family group conferences are already making a positive impact for children and in the drive to support social workers in practice improvement.

Social workers are starting to better understand and articulate what needs to be done to improve outcomes for children. Some staff can now talk about the vision for children being the centre of practice in Devon. While workforce capacity and stability continue to be a significant challenge and most social workers remain under pressure, most are excited about the future and are committed to making the changes required so that children and their families receive more timely and effective support.

Social workers talk about a more open and accessible culture and a visible senior leadership team. This is a significant shift away from the more closed and centralised

approach that has limited improvements in the past. Social workers say that they value open, safe conversations with senior leaders and have found that these conversations have started to improve practice.

Senior leaders have made recruiting and retaining social workers a high priority and are doing all they can to make Devon an attractive place to work. There is now an improved offer for both new and existing staff, with various incentives for permanent staff. Although these measures have helped increase staff morale, they have not, at this point, had sufficient impact on improving recruitment and retention.

Children and their families are now a priority in the council's plans. Elected members and corporate leaders are now embracing the need for change, after a long period of poor outcomes for children in Devon. The local authority's scrutiny committee provides robust challenge to senior leaders. Elected members are taking the shortfalls identified at the previous monitoring visit seriously and are now asking questions better targeted to ensuring that services for children and their families improve.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Tracey Ledder
Her Majesty's Inspector