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28 October 2021

Andrew Cook HMI
Regional Director

Mr Chris Spencer, Director of Children's Services
Gloucestershire County Council

Sent via email: chris.spencer@gloucestershire.gov.uk

Dear Chris,

Thank you for meeting with me, Dominic Stevens, Senior HMI, Social Care, Jane Burchall, Senior HMI, Early Years, and Simon Rowe, Senior HMI, Schools, on 30 September 2021. Please extend our thanks to Gail Hancock, Interim Director for Children's Safeguarding & Care, Kirsten Harrison, Director of Education, Clare Dudman, Head of School of Improvement, Wendy Williams, Assistant Director for Integrated Commissioning Children and Families, Sarah Hilton, Head of Early Years in Children's Services and Andy Dempsy, Director of Partnerships and Strategy, for their valuable contributions.

Social Care:

The self-assessment and performance and quality data and analysis, you shared with us before we met, provided a helpful foundation for our meeting. In the meeting itself and through our discussion, you gave us a helpful overview of the key areas in which you feel you have made progress. You also spoke of the challenges you are continuing to work through, including those imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

You told us that staffing remains a key area of focus for you. You are pleased that your reliance on agency staff has dropped from over 50% three years ago to about 20% now. You explained how you have achieved this through a range of measures, including the establishment of a social work academy and initiatives such as, 'Front line' and 'Step-up'. You are pleased that well over 90% of social workers have a caseload of 22 children or less. However, you are keen to improve on your target figure of 18 children per social worker, which currently stands at 44%. You assured us that all social workers in their assessed first year of practice have a caseload of under 18 children.

You outlined your approach to improvement and reported that the last few months have been a challenging time. Demand has risen both in referrals and the number of children in care. There has been an 11% increase in the proportion of children in care over the last 18 months. During the summer, this pressure has been further impacted on by the introduction of necessary upgrades in the council's ICT. For example, you told us that although you have continued to visit children regularly, the recording of this was not as swift, or as complete, as you would want it to be in all cases. You are continuing to plan improvements in your ICT. This includes plans to better integrate the recording and accessibility of records of early help interventions and referrals to your Single Point of Access. You plan to have these improvements in place by January 2022. You told us that the timeliness of return home

interviews has also slipped over the last few months. You acknowledged this, noted that it was most probably linked to a rise in demand, and restated a commitment to improve timeliness.

Alongside a rise in demand at the 'front door', you have also noted a rise in repeat referrals and repeat child protection plans. You believe the increase in repeat referrals may be connected to a possible risk-aversion from some partner agencies. You also highlighted the need to have a greater shared understanding of referral criteria. You are working with these partner agencies, in particular health agencies, to achieve this. You told us that the rise in repeat child protection plans is connected with a 'legacy' of historic poorer practice in sufficiently understanding and addressing the difficulties faced by children and their families.

We heard that you have a focus on improving services for children on the edge of care. You told us that you have strengthened your monitoring of the pre-proceedings element of the public law outline. You have introduced an entry to care panel and, to further reduce delay for children, are drafting joint letters of instruction for expert witnesses much earlier. Although the number of children in care continues to rise, you believe that these measures have made a positive difference for children and have reduced the rate at which the number of children in care has increased. You are confident that the edge of care team is not only focused on diverting children from care, when this is in their best interests, but also on supporting children in their placements and enabling re-unification with birth families when possible.

Sufficiency of placements also remains both a challenge and an area of significant focus for you. You told us about several pro-active developments, both 'in-house' and with partner agencies, to broaden and deepen the range of placement options you have for children and young people. You are proud of the new Trevone House development and told us about the assessment suite, two 'tier four step-down' beds and the 'PACE' bed that have been developed.

You told us that during the pandemic you worked hard to keep in touch with care leavers. You also strengthened your support to them in a number of ways, including practical measures such as food parcels and additional funding. Your own quality assurance highlights some areas of weaker practice with care leavers. You explained that this is not an issue across the service. It is limited to specific teams and individuals who you are working closely with to help improve practice.

Since Ofsted's last visit you told us that you have worked to improve the quality of personal education plans. You explained that your own quality assurance tells you that these are improving. The proportion of young people not in employment, education and training increased slightly over the last six months. We discussed how you continue to liaise with schools and direct the resources of the virtual school to achieve progress. You kindly agreed to share further data and information with us beyond this meeting to illustrate the steps you have taken and the progress you have achieved.

Overall, you are confident that the improvement you have achieved to date means that children in Gloucestershire are no longer receiving an inadequate service. You aspire to continue improving the quality and impact of the services you provide to children and families. You would like your next visit from Ofsted to be a judgement inspection.

Schools:

We recognised that you have a relatively new local authority leadership team working with schools. You shared the presentation that you made to the scrutiny committee. We asked about your initial priorities for this team. You made clear that an initial priority is to build effective partnerships with schools in order to bring about a good quality of education for pupils. You stated that visits to schools had begun to establish these valuable relationships.

An education reference group (ERG) has been set up. This group is to enable the local authority, the regional schools commissioner's representative and local education leaders to come together and discuss ongoing issues and/or concerns in Gloucestershire. It was noted that, while the group had been set up two years ago, only two meetings have taken place so far. You recognised that it has been a challenge, in the recent past, to bring important stakeholders together due to the historic lack of positive relationships and engagement. Therefore, this group is a step forward towards the local authority's ambition to ensure education leaders work together. To develop this group further, you intend to invite leaders from key multi-academy trusts.

We noted some outcomes from recent inspections of schools

- Brimscombe Church of England Primary School received a section 8 inspection in summer term. While the school retained its 'good' rating, inspectors will return to conduct a full section 5 inspection due to concerns about mathematics and pupils' vocabulary development.
- St James Church of England Junior School has recently received a section 5 inspection. The provisional judgement is that the school requires improvement. This means that, in the school's last three inspections, it has been judged to be inadequate and to require improvement twice. The school has fundamental weaknesses in its curriculum design and implementation.
- Peak Academy was deemed inadequate due to serious safeguarding failures. You have contacted the regional schools commissioner about this school and the CEO of the multi-academy trust, responsible for the school, to seek reassurances that pupils are now safeguarded.

We highlighted some key issues. We discussed the proportion of pupils being electively home educated. While you did not have up-to-date information at this time, you have begun to see a modest number of pupils beginning to return to school again. We also talked about the recommencement of routine inspection of outstanding schools. We discussed the sexual abuse review that Ofsted undertook in the summer term and explained that learning from this review will inform school inspection. We also asked you to provide us with an update on engagement in post-16 education.

SEND:

We talked about provision for children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). We shared our concern that, during the initial teacher education (ITE) inspection of the University of Gloucestershire, some trainees said they did not feel confident to meet the needs of pupils with SEND within the classroom. When some headteachers were asked about the training they had put in place, they appeared to not acknowledge the importance of this work. Some felt this wasn't necessary as their schools had low numbers of pupils with SEND. You reported that there has been a significant increase in the number of requests for education, health and care (EHC) plans. You also shared your concerns that pupils that are excluded from school are often those with an EHCP.

Early Years:

Your annual childcare sufficiency report was approved by cabinet last week. You remain confident that you have sufficient childcare places for every child who requires one. You told us that you continue to monitor the position closely to ensure you identify any risks to sufficiency early. For example, you explained how you are utilising birth data and data from planning colleagues to ensure that places are created where they are needed. In addition, you told us that you are also focusing on the creation of places for two-year-olds to prevent a potential shortfall. You reported your ongoing efforts to support settings impacted by COVID-19. This has included the provision of funding as well as support for settings to create business plans as a way of ensuring long-term viability.

We discussed the weaker early years settings in your area. Your early years team are providing support for the two settings that have recently been judged to be inadequate. You have noted a theme in the shortcomings of these settings related to safeguarding and you are addressing this through the implementation of improvement plans and the delivery of safeguarding training. In addition, you are confident that your early years team are now working more closely with your Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) to ensure settings get the support they need. You are pleased that your LADO is delivering a presentation at your forthcoming early years conference as this will raise awareness of the LADO role and the local safeguarding children partnership procedures.

You noted a pleasing increase in the number of settings that are accessing safeguarding training now that you are making greater use of your online training platform. You are conscious that there may still be some settings who are not engaging in training but who would benefit from doing so. You are using information gathered through your early years setting's annual safeguarding audits to prioritise those you work with. In addition, you told us that you are analysing safeguarding referral data to help you to identify further settings who may benefit from some intervention.

You reported that you have delivered a range of training for providers to support the implementation of the early years foundation stage reforms. You feel the majority of settings are managing the changes well. You are using your meetings with managers to build leadership capacity in individual settings. This is because you have identified that some are over-reliant on your team to ensure they are up-to-date with changes in the sector.

We shared our emerging concern about the use of apprentices in the early years sector. Information indicates that nationally some settings are not supporting apprentices well enough and do not understand the requirement to ensure that all staff, including apprentices, are trained in safeguarding. While you have not noted this to be a specific issue in your area, you will continue to work with providers to ensure they fully understand the requirements and ensure apprentices are trained and used appropriately.

I thanked you and your colleagues for the time spent preparing and for their contributions to this useful meeting.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Andrew Cook". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "A" and a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Andrew Cook HMI
Regional Director, South West, Ofsted