

13 January 2025

Adam Johnston  
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County Hall  
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Dear Mr Johnston

### **Focused visit to Worcestershire children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Worcestershire children's services on 3 and 4 December 2024. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Rebecca Quested and Matthew Hedges.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in care, with a particular focus on the:

- quality of matching, placement and decision-making for children in care
- experiences and progress of disabled children in care
- experiences and progress of children living in an unregistered children's home.

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

### **Headline findings**

Since the last inspection in May 2023, there has been an improvement in the strategic oversight of permanence planning for children in care. More children now benefit from living in homes which are well matched to meet their needs and with their legal permanence secured through special guardianship orders, adoption and the discharge of care orders following reunification with parents. Despite most caseloads having reduced and become more consistent since the last inspection in the Through Care team, leaders recognise that children would benefit from some social work caseloads reducing further and have strategies in place to address this.

There have been significant changes for children's social care since the last inspection. Worcestershire Children First (WCF), a wholly owned council company that was established following the local authority being judged inadequate in 2016, had operational responsibility for children's services from 2019. On 1 October 2024,

Worcestershire Children First was reintegrated with Worcestershire County Council (WCC). This reflected the improvements children's services had made, which was confirmed by the overall 'good' inspection judgement for Worcestershire in May 2023. In addition, the long-standing director of children's services left in July 2024 and an interim director has been appointed from within the organisation. These changes have been managed well and continuity has been provided by a stable senior leadership team within children's social care. Consequently, these changes have not impacted services provided to children and their families.

## Main findings

Since the last inspection, the consistency of services to children in care has improved. As a result, more children now benefit from social work practice which focuses on progressing their permanence plans, including through adoption, special guardianship orders and reunification with their parents.

Most social workers understand their children's needs well. Social workers are skilled at engaging with children, including using direct work tools. Their visits are purposeful and social workers listen and respond to children's wishes and feelings about who they want to see and where they want to live.

Social workers ensure that children's physical and emotional health needs are well met. They ensure that they have regular check-ups at the dentist's and the optician's. Some children's specific needs remain unassessed for too long when they are waiting for neurodevelopmental assessments. The local authority is working with the local integrated health board (ICB) to ensure these children's needs are prioritised. It is too soon to evaluate the impact of this work. The local authority in-house emotional well-being service, Anchor, provides an effective therapeutic support service for many children and their carers.

Most children are making progress at school. However, for some children, especially those with more complex and specialist needs, their educational needs are not consistently well met. Leaders have recruited additional staff to the virtual school to provide greater oversight of these children's educational plans. The impact of this cannot yet be evaluated.

Most children are settled where they are living. Social workers carefully assess their needs to ensure they are well matched to their carers and home. Those children who live outside of Worcestershire do so to meet their assessed needs and they benefit from the same level of care and support. Children are supported to engage in their hobbies and interests, such as football, cadets, gaming, playing musical instruments, showjumping and badminton.

Social workers consider children's time with family and friends carefully. They listen to children's wishes and support these when this is safe and in children's best

interests. There is a particular focus to ensure that children can spend time with their brothers and sisters when they are not able to live together.

Most disabled children are living in suitable homes where they are settled and making good progress. Social workers understand disabled children's communication needs well and complete sensitive direct work to understand their wishes and feelings. Social workers are attuned to disabled children's needs and advocate effectively for them, including for them to live with their brothers and sisters whenever possible, recognising the importance of this in maintaining their sense of identity.

Many children's plans to secure their permanence are progressing in a timely way. Social workers promote kinship care and consider all permanence options. When children are living in kinship foster care, their carers benefit from having access to the same support as mainstream foster carers. More children now have plans of special guardianship orders (SGOs) to secure permanence with their current foster carers or kinship carers. These plans are being progressed more effectively, with improved monitoring and reviewing by case progression officers and senior leaders.

Independent reviewing officers (IROs) ensure that reviews endorse plans and provide appropriate challenge when there is delay. Children are encouraged to attend their reviews and their views are well captured in review minutes. Most resulting care plans are clear and timebound, which supports their progress.

When appropriate, children are reunified with their parents following careful and detailed assessment of their parenting capacity. The IRO's, child's and parents' views are all considered. Decisions are appropriately ratified by senior leaders, providing a rationale that balances risk and the best interests of the child. Social workers and the reunification team support children and their families during the transition period. More children are now benefiting from their care orders being discharged as their parents are able to meet their needs effectively and children's services intervention is no longer required.

Permanence is secured swiftly for many children who have a plan of adoption. Social workers work closely with the regional adoption agency (Adoption Central England) to ensure that children are matched with the right family for them. Children, adopters, carers and birth parents are prepared well in advance of adoption and are clear about the support that they will receive afterwards. Children who are adopted benefit from detailed life-story books which are thoughtfully and sensitively written by their social workers. Increased oversight by leaders means that all adopted children have this work completed before they are adopted; leaders plan to extend this level of scrutiny to all children in care.

Senior leaders have established policies for when decisions are made for children to live in unregistered children's homes. This ensures that there is senior leadership and

managerial oversight of these decisions and that children only move to live in an unregistered children's home as a last resort. Children are visited weekly, and their circumstances are regularly reviewed. Senior leaders understand that these arrangements are illegal and ensure that children move to registered children's homes as soon as possible. Senior leaders encourage providers to register with Ofsted alongside continuing their search for a registered children's home.

Children told inspectors that they like where they are living and that they feel happy and well cared for. Most children said they like their current social workers and feel listened to. For example, this is reflected in children being able to visit their family who live in another country or to move from a children's home to live in foster care. Some children enjoy attending the children in care group, Who Cares, We Care, and the opportunity to influence developments in social work practice.

Some children said they have had too many changes of social worker. This means they need to repeat their story and develop new relationships. Leaders understand this and are using recruitment and retention strategies with increasing success to maintain a stable workforce.

There have been considerable changes since the last inspection within children's social care which have been managed very effectively. The new interim director of children's services has moved into the role seamlessly, developing strong political and corporate relationships and advocating successfully on behalf of children's social care despite the current financial pressures the council is facing.

Leaders have a good understanding of their service. Since the last inspection, there are improved systems in place to monitor the progress of children in securing permanence. Trackers have been developed that now provide senior leaders and managers with strategic oversight of all children's permanence. Leaders have developed a reunification team to support the timeliness of this process. This is leading to improved performance in securing SGOs, reunification of children with their parents and greater scrutiny of those children in the adoption process. This has improved forecasting and planning to make sure that children can achieve legal permanence with their long-term carers in a timely way.

Social workers report that their experience of the recent reintegration of WCF into WCC has not interrupted their work. They were well informed about the planned changes, and they have been able to continue their focus on supporting their children and families.

Leaders have ensured that children's participation in influencing service delivery and strategic developments has improved since the last inspection. Some children now enjoy the opportunity to contribute to children's social care developments through the corporate parenting board and attending the children in care group, Who Cares,

We Care. This has resulted in children contributing to how advocacy is provided and how children's voice is considered on a local university social work course.

There are established audit processes in place. However, audit levels have been low in this service area, which limits the impact on social work practice. The audit tool is comprehensive and is mostly used appropriately to identify strengths and areas for development. Feedback from carers and children is consistently sought. When a response is provided, it gives an added depth to the audit process. A 'closing the loop' process is in place; however, this is not consistently leading to improved practice.

A comprehensive training offer supports social workers' development. Training which helps social workers to understand and communicate effectively with their children was particularly valued by social workers in the disabled children's team.

Most social workers receive regular supervision. There is variability in the quality of the recorded supervision, with stronger supervision records capturing specific timebound actions supporting children's progress. Informal supervision and decision-making by managers are recorded on children's case records. This provides accountability and supports social workers' practice.

Social workers appreciate the support they receive from their team managers and feel able to gain support from colleagues and other managers, as necessary. This includes those who are newly qualified or new to the organisation.

Most social workers enjoy their work. They are committed to their children and are effective advocates for them. Workloads within the Through Care team have improved since the last inspection with greater consistency in social workers' caseloads. However, leaders recognise that some social workers' caseloads remain too high and are focused on reducing these.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning the next inspection or visit.

Yours sincerely

Rebecca Quested  
**His Majesty's Inspector**