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21 March 2019

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Dear Mr Gregg

Focused visit to Coventry City Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Coventry City Council children's services on 26 and 27 February 2019. The inspectors were John Roughton, HMI, and Diane Partridge, HMI.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for permanence planning and achieving permanence for children in care. Inspectors also evaluated the effectiveness of performance management, management oversight, supervision, quality assurance and the continuous professional development of the workforce.

Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers. They also looked at local authority performance management, examples of case file audits and workforce development arrangements.

Overview

While there is a concerted focus on achieving permanence for children in care in Coventry, the quality of social work practice remains inconsistent. Too many children do not have an updated assessment to inform their care plan, and the Public Law Outline (PLO) is not used effectively at the pre-proceedings stage to assess and support children who may be at risk of harm. Delays in achieving permanence exist for some children on a placement order, and some permanence options, such as special guardianship, are not promoted enough. Children's files do not always show how permanence decisions are made. The local authority does not have a system to track and prioritise matching for children placed in long-term fostering arrangements.

The local authority understands itself well and has responded to the areas for improvement identified at the last inspection relating to permanence. However, the local authority recognises that although recent improvements have been made, more needs to be done. There is strong political support for children in care. Children live

in placements that meet their needs. The development of performance information increasingly allows senior leaders to track the progress of most children towards achieving permanence, and the recent service design has reduced transitions and changes in social workers for children.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- Early identification of children who should be considered under the pre-proceedings stage of the PLO.
- Early identification of connected persons, carers and foster carers who may be able to offer permanence.
- Placement choice for children, with a plan for adoption.
- Consideration and promotion of special guardianship.
- Tracking arrangements for children on placement orders and those in long-term foster placements.
- Consistency in the quality of the recording of supervision and ensuring key documents are on case files.

Findings

- Senior leaders have a clear and accurate knowledge of their services, supporting permanence and the areas that need to improve. Since the 2017 inspection, there has been a strategic drive around improving permanence planning, with a clearly articulated strategy and panel arrangements. Inspectors found a positive impact of this on children. For example, an increase in fostering to adopt placements is an emerging strength.
- Children in Coventry are benefiting from increasing workforce stability. Children develop positive relationships with their social workers, who know them well, and this ensures that children's views inform their plans. Social workers understand the importance of life-story work, which is routinely done to help children understand their early experiences and why they are in care. The newly designed through-care service ensures a well-managed transition to leaving care and beyond.
- The vast majority of children are appropriately placed with their carers. They have a current and effective permanence plan that has improved their situation and outcomes. The case progression officer is a valuable resource, ensuring children's timely progress through pre-proceedings and the court process.
- More children in Coventry are benefiting from careful consideration of alternative care arrangements when they cannot remain with their birth parents. Increasingly used family group conferences identify support networks

around the birth family. Contact arrangements are thoughtfully planned and informed by risk assessments, to ensure appropriate relationships are safely managed and maintained. In an increasing number of cases, Independent Reviewing Officers escalate issues which are impacting on delays to achieving permanence.

- Recent practice in achieving early permanence for children is improving. More children in long-term placements have been formally matched with their foster carers in the last 12 months. This security has resulted in a positive impact for some of these children on their overall welfare and progress
- In response to delays in securing permanence for some children, a connected carers assessment team has been created. Initial viability, connected carer and special guardianship assessments are comprehensive and analytical. Management oversight is thorough. This team is supporting improved quality of viability assessments across the wider service.
- There is a sufficient range of placements to support children being placed with their brothers and sisters when this is assessed as being in their best interests. Coventry has been successful in recruiting more foster carers locally, leading to a 10% reduction in children placed out of area over the last 12 months. This means that children can maintain positive relationships within their community.
- Coventry invests in, prioritises and understands the value of quality assurance and audit activity, with appropriate weight and focus given to the experiences and outcomes for children. There is a clear governance framework in place for the sharing of learning, leading to improving practice and better outcomes for children.
- There is a comprehensive and well-articulated workforce strategy, and a decreasing reliance on agency staff. Social workers speak positively about the impact of the strong training offer, and this year's focus is on children achieving permanence.

Areas for Improvement

- Too many children do not have an up-to-date, written analytical assessment to inform their care plans. Their current and changing needs are, therefore, not adequately addressed.
- Should children wish to access their records, they would not easily see how important decisions in their lives were informed or reached. Supervision records do not reflect the quality of discussions reported to inspectors. Children's files do not always contain all relevant documentation to track decision-making processes. Current administrative arrangements are not effective in supporting social workers with these tasks.

- While children at risk of significant harm are routinely identified and taken through child protection processes, they are not always subject to the additional assessment and support afforded through the PLO. Only 15% of children who enter care proceedings have been considered within the pre-proceedings process. This may mean that, for some children, care proceedings either could have been avoided, or are taking longer than necessary.
- For some children with a plan for adoption, there are delays in family finding. This is due to a linear approach in which prospective adopters' reports are shared one at a time with social workers by Adoption Central England.
- Since the previous inspection in March 2017, fewer children have been achieving permanence through special guardianship or child arrangements orders. More children who are looked after could benefit from the stability offered by a special guardianship order (SGO). More needs to be done to promote SGOs and ensure that carers understand their entitlements. The local authority recognises this and is currently reviewing its SGO payments policy.
- Some children do not have clear information about their placements through their childhood and beyond. The local authority does not have systems to track which children in long-term foster care have not been formally matched with their carers, and therefore do not have the benefit of the enhanced security this provides. There is a lack of clarity across the workforce as to arrangements for confirming long-term matching, and there is inconsistency in the priority given to formalising permanence for children in long-term foster placements.
- Adoption is routinely considered as a permanence option for children. However, some children who are harder to place remain subject to placement orders for too long without being successfully matched, and not enough consideration is given to the impact of such delay on children's sense of permanence.

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

Yours sincerely,

John Roughton
Her Majesty's Inspector