

29 November 2017

Mr Ade Adetosoye  
London Borough of Bromley  
Civic Centre  
Stockwell Close  
Bromley  
BR1 3UH

Dear Mr Ade Adetosoye

### **Fifth monitoring visit to Bromley's local authority children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Bromley children's services on 30 and 31 October 2017. The visit is the fifth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate for overall effectiveness in June 2016. The inspectors were Marcie Taylor HMI and Tara Geere HMI.

The local authority is making steady progress in improving planning and achieving permanent arrangements for children and young people looked after. In the cases reviewed on this visit, no inadequate practice was found and some aspects of good practice were identified.

### **Areas covered by the visit**

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in permanence planning and support for children and young people looked after, including:

- the planning, management and review of children looked after in need of permanent placements, including long-term fostering, special guardianship and adoption
- the assessment and support of carers, including connected persons, foster carers and adopters
- the quality and timeliness of direct work with and for children, including life story work
- social work capacity, including caseloads.

The visit considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, other supporting documentation and discussions with a range of staff, who included social workers and managers. In addition, inspectors observed a placement-planning meeting and an early permanence panel, and spoke with foster carers, adopters and the independent adoption panel chair.

## **Overview**

Within the cases considered, there is steady progress in improving permanence planning for children looked after. The processes in place to make and progress plans for children to live with foster carers until adulthood, connected persons and adopters are working well. This is leading to more timely and considered decisions for children. Support for carers is in place and children are living in increasingly stable placements.

## **Findings and evaluation of progress**

The local authority is making steady progress towards ensuring that it makes timely and appropriate decisions in order to achieve permanent placements for children who cannot live with their birth families. The systems and processes in place provide effective oversight of the progression and timeliness of plans. Oversight occurs through regular permanency planning meetings and the early permanence panel, which is chaired by the head of fostering, adoption and resources.

A clear pathway for early permanence is leading to increasingly timely decisions, particularly for children with a plan for adoption. Specialist social workers now undertake family finding and attend initial and subsequent permanency planning meetings to identify suitable carers at the earliest opportunity. Managers oversee progress using comprehensive trackers that consider plans at every decision point to reduce the potential for drift and delay. The proactive engagement with the judiciary by the director of children's social care is improving relationships with the local family court judge and the progression of care plans in proceedings is increasingly timely. There is significant improvement for children with a plan for adoption, who are placed quickly with their adopters in most cases.

The local authority clearly identifies which children need plans for long-term fostering, and is making progress in identifying suitable placements or endorsing current arrangements. However, some children looked after do not yet have knowledge and a sufficient certainty of their placements into adulthood, albeit they are living in stable homes with carers who are committed to them. Senior managers have a clear action plan to address this.

Assessments of family members as special guardians are increasingly timely and the quality of assessments is improving in depth and analysis. This is supporting more children to have stability and permanence within their extended birth families. A newly established connected person and special guardianship team provides support that is regularly reviewed. This includes local community drop-in sessions held in children and family centres, workshops, and programmes of activity, such as sport and fun days. This has been well received by special guardians and enables them to share experiences and ideas, as well as seek help with finance and access local services.

The local authority has renewed and improved relationships with foster carers in the borough, who reported to inspectors that they are now included and involved in the service review. A newly formed steering group is increasing confidence in and communication with council officers. Foster carers are particularly appreciative of the appointment of a finance officer, who acts as a single point of contact to oversee and resolve financial issues effectively and in a timely manner. In July 2017, the fostering team was reorganised to differentiate recruitment and assessment activity from supervision and support. This has led to more timely work that has improved the quality of assessments, supervision and reviews. Adopters spoke very positively to inspectors about their experience with Bromley as an adoption agency.

Some transition plans for children moving to their permanent homes are inconsistent and require improvement. In stronger examples, there is sensitive consideration of the child's attachment to their current carers, and introductory meetings with new carers are thoughtful and conducted at a pace that is appropriate to the age and understanding of the child. The use of a 'settling in' letter is an effective way to encourage and maintain contact arrangements between children and birth family members following adoption.

A plan to amalgamate the fostering and adoption panels is well advanced, with training planned to occur in December 2017 ahead of implementation in January 2018. This will increase the capacity to consider foster carers' and adopters' approval and reviews, and consider matches in a more timely way. The local authority has taken this opportunity to ensure that members of the panel have the experience and diversity to match the local area's demography. The adoption panel chair reports that the quality of prospective adopter reports is good, although they also report that child permanence reports vary in quality. Inspectors saw evidence of this on this visit. Child permanence reports are not routinely updated and they do not sufficiently evidence efforts to engage birth family members in the process. The local authority is aware that the consistency of practice in this area needs to improve. Commitment and support from the council's corporate resource have improved the timeliness and quality of panel minutes.

In all cases seen by inspectors, social workers know the children well and some examples of imaginative and sensitive direct work, including life story work, are evident. Caseloads are reducing in line with the council's ambition. Most social workers spoken to on this visit reported that they have more capacity to build positive relationships with children and undertake purposeful direct work with families, including an increasing number of parenting assessments. Most social workers speak with confident authority about their practice. However, inconsistent and insufficiently detailed recording on some electronic case records does not reflect the quality of direct work undertaken by the majority of social workers.

Senior management oversight of the quality of practice for children looked after is good. Regular auditing of cases undertaken by all senior managers identifies areas for improvement. Training and support are revised accordingly, to meet emerging

themes and target areas for improvement. The overview of audit findings is increasingly outcome focused, specific and measurable, and is informing priority actions. This is improving practice for children looked after in Bromley.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Marcie Taylor

**Her Majesty's Inspector**