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Dear Mr Diamond

### **Monitoring visit of Birmingham city council children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Birmingham city council children's services on 6 and 7 March 2018. The visit was the fourth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in November 2016. The inspectors were Peter McEntee, HMI, and Julie Knight Stevens, HMI.

The local authority is maintaining progress seen at the last full inspection in the majority of services for children looked after. Additional progress and improvement from the point of the inspection is demonstrated in specific areas such as foster to adopt and the effectiveness of challenge and escalation made by Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs).

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

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the area of children looked after by the local authority. In particular, we considered practice in relation to children coming into care in the last 12 months as well as practice in relation to children already in care. Inspectors focused on whether effective plans are being made for children's future permanent care arrangements, how these plans are being progressed and whether children are achieving good outcomes as a result. Consideration was also given to the role and influence of IROs in ensuring that care planning is robust and timely.

A range of evidence was considered during the visit, including electronic case records, supervision files and notes, discussions with social workers and senior

practitioners working with children in care and other information provided by staff and managers.

## **Overview**

Positive progress identified at the point of the last inspection has been maintained, with further improvement evident in specific service areas. Senior managers continue to be aware that further work needs to be done to ensure that services for children are of a standard at which their outcomes are consistently good. Children are brought into the care of the local authority appropriately, and where required the authority is taking prompt action through the courts to secure the care of children. Almost all children's plans, including plans for permanency, are being made on a timely basis, although the quality of plans is not consistently good. For some children in stable long-term foster placements, more needs to be done to secure permanent arrangements for their future by consideration of whether residence orders or special guardianship orders would be more appropriate. Reviews of care plans chaired by IROs are regular and in almost all cases result in appropriate recommendations that ensure care planning progresses without delay. There is evidence of good partnership working with other services in many cases. However, in a significant number of cases some relevant partners are not making necessary contributions to key discussions about children's care planning. This means that the potential for children's outcomes to improve can be delayed or not maximized. Progress has been made in successfully challenging some of these issues, but IROs and social work staff need to be more consistent in doing this. An improved quality of practice has been enabled by a more stable workforce and more manageable caseloads for social workers. Managers undertake regular and useful evaluations of casework practice. These now need to progress from ensuring compliance with required processes to focusing on embedding a good quality of practice. Focus is also needed on demonstrating how good practice links to better outcomes for children.

## **Findings and evaluation of progress**

When children need to come into the care of the local authority, appropriate and timely action is taken through the courts if necessary. Where there are concerns about the ability of parents to care for children prior to the birth of a child, assessments are thorough and timely. Work is focused on meeting court timescales, and where these are not being met there are clear and appropriate reasons for this. Completion of assessments during the court process, including specialist assessments, is timely. In all cases seen, children were brought into care appropriately.

The quality of care plans remains too inconsistent. The best are detailed, with clear actions and timescales that focus on good outcomes for children, parents and carers. Weaker plans lack a clear focus on progress in key areas and timescales for actions to be achieved. Almost all plans demonstrated an early consideration of permanency

options. This enables progress to be made towards achieving a permanent care arrangement for children without delay. These arrangements include use of effective fostering to adopt placements. A good example facilitated both a stable placement for a child and a speedy adoption.

The local authority continues to deal with a legacy of bringing some children into care early in life, who have remained in care, sometimes for many years, albeit in stable placements with relatives or long-term carers. Some of these children could benefit from being made subject to residence or special guardianship orders, which would confirm the permanence of their living arrangements and reduce unnecessary social work intervention. In the last year, the authority has made positive policy changes to ensure that no carer is financially disadvantaged by a move to either of these orders. On this basis, these cases should be reviewed and carers supported where appropriate to apply for an order.

Reviews of plans are timely and in many, but not all, cases IROs have visited children between reviews to establish and maintain relationships with them. Some children have advocates who also attend reviews, helping to ensure that children's voices and wishes are heard. Almost all reviews are focused on the needs of the child. However, in a number of cases where brothers and sisters are placed together, their reviews cover all of the children and, as a result, their individual different needs are not given sufficient focus and can be overlooked. As a consequence, in a small minority of cases, there was some drift in securing the right plan for each child. Children are supported well to have regular contact with brothers and sisters they do not live with. For some children, this includes contact with adopted younger siblings. The need for life-story book work is identified at an early point in many cases and this helps ensure that children have a good understanding of their history and why they are in care.

Partnership work is not as robust as it needs to be. In some cases, relevant professionals are not always invited to children looked after reviews. This includes local authority solicitors when a case is in proceedings and also family centre staff involved in monitoring contacts. The local authority should take account of the benefits for children in ensuring that these staff are invited so that their views can be fully considered.

In other cases where partners, in particular schools and health visitors, are invited to children's reviews, their attendance is not routine. This is despite of the need for and relevance of their contributions. At important transitional reviews for older young people, adult services, and in some instances the 18+ team, are not always represented. This limits the effectiveness of forward planning at a crucial point in a young person's life. There is some evidence of challenge by IROs in relation to these absences, but this needs to be both more consistent and robust to affect change. An established escalation process demonstrates that IROs are able to identify and challenge effectively any shortfalls in practice. In most cases, issues identified are resolved in a timely manner.

There is evidence of good partnership work with some services, for example the therapeutic emotional support service, support provided internally by schools, and 'Forward Thinking', the NHS provider of mental health services for children and young people that provides counselling for individual children. Most cases demonstrate effective work by the children's school and by the virtual school staff.

Personal education plans and pathway plans are routinely completed and included in children's case records. There are examples of imaginative use of the pupil premium to build on children's progress and reward effort and attainment.

Social work staff spoken to talk positively about the children they work with and they are able to identify children's strengths, what they are good at and what they are proud of. Almost all know the children's histories and this is evident in the detailed direct work completed with them. This is used to identify effectively children's needs and provide the support they require. Supervision of staff is regular, and recording is often detailed, with clear action points. In many instances, there are some elements of reflection and analysis, but this is not yet consistent and better supervision would see discussions more clearly linked to the long-term outcomes sought.

The local authority's own casework evaluation framework is effective at identifying how well social workers comply with policy and process. However, managers who evaluate cases are not consistently identifying the impact of practice on the child and how and whether outcomes are being achieved in the child's timescale. The local authority now needs to move without delay towards consistently evaluating these areas if it is to progress further and support staff in embedding the link between a good quality of practice and improved outcomes for children.

The local authority has demonstrated that it has maintained and made some further improvements to the quality of social work practice since the last inspection. Further work remains to be done to ensure that practice is consistently good and that the best outcomes for all children are achieved on a timely and consistent basis.

I would like to thank all the staff who contributed to our visit and their positive engagement with the process.

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

Yours sincerely

Peter McEntee HMI

**Her Majesty's Inspector**