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Clive Jones
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Dear Mr Jones,

Focused visit to Telford & Wrekin local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Telford & Wrekin local authority children's services on 18 September 2018. The inspectors were Peter McEntee, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Pauline Higham, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for permanence and permanency planning for children looked after by the local authority. Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.

Overview

The local authority has been able to demonstrate some progress in the area of focus since the last inspection. There has been a renewed focus on ensuring that permanency plans are in place for almost all children by their second review. A permanency panel is now in place and this is helping to ensure progress in planning and securing positive long-term outcomes for children. For most children who require adoption, plans are timely, and children are placed with prospective adopters quickly. The majority of children who remain in care are placed in stable long-term fostering placements. Many of these children have been formally matched with their carers. The local authority is active in considering extended family as connected carers, and, in some but not all cases, it considers whether special guardianship orders (SGOs) are appropriate long-term outcomes. However, a small number of children have not been considered for either SGO or adoption when they could have been. Care planning meetings are not used effectively to monitor and update plans,

particularly in children looked after teams. Life-story work and later-life letters are not being progressed in a timely way in children looked after teams, and particularly for those children who are subject to long-term fostering arrangements. However, where children in safeguarding teams have plans for adoption, life-story work is completed quickly.

The local authority's practice evaluation process is not providing an accurate account of the quality of social work practice, and there is insufficient moderation of auditing practice to ensure that less than good practice is clearly identified.

Findings

- The local authority has responded appropriately to the findings of the last inspection, with a focus on strengthening their permanency planning processes for children looked after. This focus has included the creation of an effective permanency panel to monitor and review plans for children. The panel has helped to ensure that almost all children looked after now have a permanency plan by their second review.
- There is evidence of drift in finalising the permanency plans of a small number of children, often because of changes in or absence of the allocated social worker. This has led to delays in finding permanent living arrangements. However, the introduction of the permanency panel has ensured identification of these issues, and better progress to resolve these issues has been evident during the last nine months.
- Managers recognise the value of connected persons placements. They take prompt action to ensure that these are considered and, where possible, placements are made. The local authority is also active in considering applications for SGOs, with 15 made in the last 12 months. However, the care planning process in children looked after teams is, in most cases, not being used at all or is being used infrequently, and opportunities to reflect on planning and plan progression are not being utilised as a result. This means that a small number of children in stable, long-term placements have not been considered for either an SGO or for adoption when they could have been, for example when they have been placed with a connected person for several years. In some cases, foster parents do not want to consider an SGO because of concerns about the management of contact with relatives or concerns over whether support will continue to be offered. There is little evidence in these cases that social workers are giving full consideration to the needs of children and the advantages of both SGOs and adoption.
- Practice in the safeguarding teams is demonstrably of a better quality, and this ensures that almost all children who should be considered for adoption are being considered. This includes placement of sibling groups, older children and children who are harder to place. There is early consideration of possible

adoptive placements where appropriate during proceedings and early matching to possible adopters after proceedings end. This helps to ensure shorter timescales in the making of adoption orders. Where there is an adoption plan, most children are placed in appropriate placements and many have only had one move before an adoptive placement. Adoption plans for almost all children are finalised on a timely basis, and there is good use of care planning meetings to ensure progression of the plan.

- A fostering to adopt option is now in place and although good use of this was seen, it is not always considered for all suitable children. This is a missed opportunity.
- Adopters are offered post-adoption support, including links with more experienced adopters and insights into parenting adopted children through inclusion in an established parenting programme. This contributes to increased placement stability and improved security for adopted children.
- Children looked after reviews are timely and include appropriate multi-agency support and contributions. Some young people attend reviews, and the need for advocacy is discussed on a regular basis, with advocates being provided where a need is identified.
- While some challenge is evident by independent reviewing officers (IROs), issues such as repeated absence of care planning meetings are not challenged effectively or escalated to senior management. This means that opportunities to improve the quality of practice are being missed. IROs in many but not all cases visit between reviews, but in some instances the content of the visit is not recorded. This lessens the value of the visit as a further opportunity for the voice of the child to be heard.
- In children looked after teams where children have long-term care plans, life-story book work and later-life letters are not being progressed despite repeated requests by managers and IROs during supervision and reviews. Poor social work practice and lack of managerial effectiveness mean that young people may not always be clear about why they are in care or what their history is. This is likely to contribute to an increased instability in the young people's placements in the future. In contrast, in children's safeguarding teams where children have a plan for adoption, good-quality life-story books are being completed, together with later-life letters, on a timely basis.
- Some young people who have long-term fostering plans have contact with parents and extended family frequently throughout the year. In some cases, there was little evidence that social workers and IROs had fully considered the impact of such frequent contact in terms of future placement stability and the willingness of some foster parents to consider other options, such as SGOs.

- Children are visited by their social workers on a regular basis. Children are seen alone and their views and wishes recorded. In most cases, this provides a clear sense of the child and how they feel.
- Where children looked after receive a service from the children with a disability team, the children are in long-term matched placements that are stable and meet their needs. These children also benefit from effective multi-agency working that supports the stability of their placements. The local authority has made much-needed financial commitments to support the stability of children's placements. This includes funding adaptations to foster carers' homes.
- Management oversight and supervision of the majority of children looked after cases are carried out regularly. However, in a few instances, cases are not discussed for several months. The quality of supervision is variable. Too many meetings merely record updates of information and actions to be undertaken but don't include timescales. This means that social workers are not always benefiting from the opportunity to reflect on their cases. The lack of clear timescales makes progress more difficult than necessary to measure.
- The local authority's practice evaluation process is not providing an accurate account of the quality of social work practice. An appropriate audit template is in place to provide information about the quality of practice, but is not being used effectively by auditors. The moderation of audit findings is not robust enough to ensure that less than good practice is clearly identified, and it is over optimistic. As a result, senior managers and leaders do not have an accurate assessment of the quality of practice and, as a result, they cannot provide the necessary points of learning to staff.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The consideration of special guardianship orders when children are placed on a long-term or permanent basis with connected carers.
- The oversight of care planning meetings to ensure that all children looked after have their plans progressed without delay and in line with the local authority's own policy and procedure.
- The provision of life-story work and later-life letters so that all children with long-term fostering plans can understand their histories and the reasons why they are looked after.
- The quality and regularity of supervision so that the cases of all children looked after are considered.
- Opportunities for social workers to reflect on and analyse cases that include complex issues.

- Auditing of practice and measurement of performance to avoid over optimism and inaccurate analysis, as well as the process for undertaking and drawing learning from the moderation of case audits.

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

Yours sincerely

Peter McEntee
Her Majesty's Inspector