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Dear Mr Foster,

Focused visit to Bedford Borough Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Bedford Borough Council children's services on 11 December 2018. The inspectors were Brenda McInerney, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Nick Stacey, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need and children subject to a child protection plan.

Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers and team managers. They also reviewed local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.

Overview

Since the last inspection of children's services in February 2017, actions taken by leaders have improved the stability of the social care workforce and reduced social work caseloads. These changes are resulting in improving outcomes for children in need and children in need of protection. By investing in key areas, such as the Social Work Academy and new programmes with parents who perpetrate domestic abuse, leaders have been able to develop and retain skilled social workers and strengthen support for vulnerable children. The senior leadership team has recently developed, in partnership with staff, an ambitious vision of child-centred, outcome-focused practice. A new model of practice, based on systemic principles and building relationships with families, is in the early stages of being implemented across the service. However, it is too soon to evaluate the impact for children of some of the more recent initiatives.

Rigorous performance management has resulted in sustained improvements in areas of core social work activity, ensuring regular social work visits to children and timely completion of assessments before child protection conferences. While there is an organisational culture of reflection in Bedford, the current quality assurance arrangements do not have sufficient impact on improving practice.

Leaders know the service well and have a realistic view of the quality of social work practice. Inspectors' findings during the visit largely reflected the local authority's own analysis that further work is required to achieve consistency in the quality of social work practice and management oversight.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The quality of children's plans, including planning specific outcomes for children.
- Capturing children's views in their assessments and reviews of their plans.
- The quality of case supervision for staff.
- Learning from case audits and other quality assurance activity in order to improve practice.

Findings

- The quality of services for children in need and children in need of protection is improving. Child in need planning is increasingly effective and actions in children's plans are better focused. Flexible, targeted support provided by early help practitioners and local providers is making a difference for children. Reviews of children's plans are regular and attended by the key professionals. Minutes of reviews are well recorded, and, in better managed cases, they demonstrate close attention to the progress of outcomes for children, as well as measuring the level of engagement and impact of services.
- Child protection plans include well-crafted danger statements indicating clearly the changes required to achieve safe and secure parenting for children. The consistent engagement of key professionals in conferences and core groups supports purposeful discussion and contributions to risk assessment and planning. When children's planning is escalated from child in need to child protection, the reasons are clearly recorded in well-attended strategy meetings. In cases seen by inspectors, children are being appropriately stepped down from child protection plans when their circumstances have improved, and families benefit from a required period of child in need support to sustain the positive changes made.

- Children are seen by their social workers in line with their plans, both at home and in the community. Children are seen alone where possible and appropriate. Social workers use creative methods to help children understand concerns for them and why certain decisions have been made. Social workers demonstrate good practice in including fathers, whether they live within the household or not, and members of the wider extended family, in planning for children.
- A minority of child protection plans are too adult-orientated, with insufficient focus on the specific outcomes needed to ensure children's safety. As a result, decision-making in these cases tends to focus on parental compliance more than on whether there is evidence of children's improved safety. This can be compounded by assessments and reviews of plans which do not consistently include children's views about their lived experiences within their families.
- While staff routinely seek parental feedback in audits and following child protection conferences, opportunities for children to influence decisions about the help they receive are too limited. Few children participate in their conferences, and support from advocates is not always promoted by social workers. As a result, decision-making at conferences is not always well informed by children's views.
- Practice in pre-proceedings work, under the Public Law Outline, is effective, resulting in timely action to protect children from further harm. This includes escalation to care proceedings where pre-proceedings are not bringing about change for children. Families benefit from a range of interventions to reduce risk, which includes risks from parental mental health or substance misuse, alongside the timely completion of a range of parenting and specialist assessments. This means that risks to children are understood and interventions are tailored accordingly.
- Letters before proceedings to parents set out safeguarding concerns for children in a detailed way, but they are not written in plain English. This means that social workers have to spend additional time explaining the concerns to parents.
- When children are no longer able to remain safely within their own families, the decision-making for children to come in to care is proportionate and timely. The rationale is well documented in admission to care decision forms, and there is appropriate oversight by senior managers.
- Working with diversity and the specific cultures of children and families has been a focus of practice workshops led by the principal social worker. Inspectors saw examples of sensitive work with families, including the use of 'cultural genograms' to aid discussions about experiences which may affect parenting ability. Sensitive and informed approaches supporting mothers to break the cycle of domestic abuse take account of cultural factors and community context.

- Disabled children receive a high-quality social work service. Safeguarding concerns are responded to quickly. When risks increase or fail to reduce quickly enough, children's plans are proportionately escalated to child protection planning and, where necessary, care proceedings are initiated. Children benefit from sensitive direct work with social workers, who plan carefully to understand children's individual communication needs.
- Staff identify children who are at risk from gang affiliation and exploitation and offer tailored support. A serious youth violence panel and regular complex strategy meetings are underpinning local coordinated work to reduce risk for some young people. Where necessary, authoritative action is taken to protect young people at risk in the community, including the provision of specialist care placements. However, for some young people, the coordination of support is less effective, for example when responses are determined by levels of offending behaviour rather than their vulnerability. Some young people continue to be vulnerable due to their lack of engagement in education.
- Quality assurance approaches do not sufficiently consider the quality of child protection planning, or the quality of decision-making and supervision. Leaders had identified the need to improve quality assurance and intend to implement a new framework in early 2019.
- Social workers receive regular supervision, and senior managers are readily available for case consultations. However, in a small number of supervisions, where plans were not progressing, supervision did not ensure corrective action was taken. Inspectors saw better examples of reflective case discussions, where curiosity and challenge resulted in clear action planning for children.
- Staff morale in Bedford is high, and many social workers spoke of how they feel valued by senior managers and leaders. Staff development is prioritised, and social workers' manageable caseloads mean that they have capacity to attend a range of training. Social workers are making imaginative use of recently provided smart phones and tablets to complete direct work with children and in recording their work in collaborative ways with families.

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

Brenda McInerney
Her Majesty's Inspector