

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231
Textphone 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/ofsted



17 December 2018

Paul Boyce
Corporate Director for Children
Children's Services Department
Cheshire Lines Building
Canning Street
Birkenhead
Wirral
CH41 1ND

Dear Paul Boyce

Monitoring visit of Wirral local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Wirral local authority children's services on 12 and 13 December 2018. The visit was the eighth and final monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in September 2016. The inspectors were Paula Thomson-Jones and Neil Penswick, Her Majesty's Inspectors.

The local authority is making progress in improving social work support and services for children in care and care leavers. However, work to ensure timely permanence planning has not developed quickly enough, with insufficient focus by managers on ensuring improvement for all children.

Areas covered by the visit

The focus of this monitoring visit was on the experiences and progress of children in care, with a specific focus on permanence planning for children and the services provided to care leavers. Inspectors also reviewed the response to 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless.

Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including children's electronic case records, service plans and performance data. Inspectors reviewed casework with social workers and personal advisers and met with team managers.

Overview

At the time of the inspection in 2016, the judgement for the experiences of children in care was that it required improvement to be good. However, previous monitoring visits have reported that, following inspection, additional deficits in practice were also identified by the local authority. This, in addition to an increase in the numbers

of children in care since the inspection, had led to an increase in the scale of improvement required.

At this monitoring visit, inspectors found that while the local authority has put better systems in place, this has not yet resulted in improved permanence planning for children. Progress for care leavers is stronger, with evidence of service developments starting to make a positive impact for young people.

Children and young people whose cases were reviewed during this visit are seen regularly by their workers, and statutory requirements are met. More children have had their needs re-assessed, leading to better quality planning and improvement in outcomes for some children who have returned successfully to their birth families or are better supported in their placements. However, many children still experience delay in their plan for permanence being implemented, and this causes some to experience further change or instability that prevents their outcomes from improving. For some children, the impact of previous poor practice is not sufficiently recognised and responded to. There is insufficient management oversight of the work with this group of children to ensure timely progress of their permanence plans.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Children who have come into care in the last six months have had their need for permanence considered at the four-month child in care review, and for most there is a preferred permanence plan identified. This is not always accompanied by a contingency plan to ensure that there is an alternative if needed, which, for some, leads to further delay.

Where children have been in care for longer periods, there is evidence of an agreed understanding about what the plan for permanence is, but this is not always progressed effectively or quickly enough.

Children who have a plan of adoption are not consistently matched and placed with adopters in a timely way. Where very young children are the subject of care proceedings, progress towards adoption is better. However, some children were seen during the visit who were made the subject of placement orders up to two years ago. At the time of the visit, there was little progress made in placing them for adoption and no clear plan as to the steps to be taken or alternatives considered. It is not clear from case records what efforts have been made to find families for them, and what management systems are in place to ensure progress.

Most children seen who are in long-term foster placements are suitably matched, and many enjoy stable placements. However, for others, placements with their extended family members have not led to permanence, they have experienced further disruption and have had to move to alternative placements. In all cases, social workers understand the need to complete a re-assessment of children's needs and identify a new permanence plan. However, this does not always include effective contingency planning to prevent further delay.

The local authority has successfully completed the discharge of care orders via placement with parent regulations for 34 children in the last 12 months. There are a further 31 children identified as having this as their permanence option. During this visit, inspectors saw examples of strong, clear placement, with parents' agreements and good support work to ensure that children were safe, and that their needs were met. The local authority has also identified 39 children who may benefit from living in special guardianship arrangements with their existing carers rather than being in care. Again, in recent work seen, the assessments undertaken were effective, with high-quality support plans in place to help children living with special guardians.

Achieving successful permanence for some children is made more difficult by their very complex life experiences and by previous poor social work practice. To try and address this, the local authority has established a permanence panel that meets regularly and undertakes detailed consideration of permanence options for some children. For those children whose plans are considered, there is thorough consideration of options, for example balancing safeguarding issues in the birth family with older children's established relationships and their wishes and feelings. Despite the work of the panel, and some tracking systems in place, there is little evidence of robust systematic management oversight to ensure that permanence plans for all children are progressed and achieved.

Social work practice with children in care has improved and there has been some increased stability in the workforce. More children are seen by social workers who know them well and can talk about them in detail. Many children have benefited from updated assessments of their needs to inform future planning and intervention. During this visit, there was evidence of some good-quality direct work with children to inform planning, and the voice of children was evident on many files. However, this direct work does not lead to children understanding or having a record of their life history. No children considered during this visit had life-story work available to them, even those placed for adoption. While the local authority was aware of this deficit, at the time of this monitoring visit they do not yet have a clear plan to address this issue.

All children have a personal education plan, but the quality is not consistently good. Many plans are too brief and do not include sufficient detail as to how young people will benefit from the additional support they should receive. Children's emotional health and well-being needs are better understood through the increased use of strengths and difficulties questionnaires. For some children, this leads to effective services to meet their needs, but this is not in place for all children. The lack of a clear pathway or a well-coordinated range of services means that not all children benefit from the right help when they need it.

There are regular reviews of the support provided for children in care, and, for many, these reviews are well recorded and offer clear evidence of robust monitoring of the progress of plans. Some children have their meetings and care plans recorded in child-friendly language, with clear plans and timescales for action. For others, this is not the case, and notes of their meetings are not recorded quickly enough to be

useful in helping everyone understand what has been agreed. Children and young people do attend or participate in their reviews and their voice and views are often recorded clearly in their files. Examples were seen during the visit of children using advocacy services, but there remains some confusion about availability and the scope of work that these services can provide for children. This is preventing all children who need them from accessing the services.

There has been an increase in the oversight that independent reviewing officers (IROs) give to the progress of children's plans, and there is some evidence of increased challenge when these are not progressing. However, this is not consistent and not all drift and delay experienced by children is identified and addressed. High caseloads and changes in IROs continue to prevent consistent effective independent challenge.

There has been significant work to improve the service offered to all care leavers since the inspection in 2016, when the service was inadequate. The re-establishment of the care leavers' service over 12 months ago led to early signs of improvement, which were evaluated at the monitoring visit in August 2017. Since then, the service has continued to develop and expand, with an increase in personal advisers and strengthened management capacity.

All the cases reviewed during this visit evidenced young people having regular visits from social workers and personal advisers. They are provided with some good-quality practical support, including finance, housing and support to attend health appointments. Workers could talk about the young people they supported and were aware of their wishes and feelings, but this was not always well recorded on file. Young people living out of area are 'in touch' and are well supported by personal advisers, who use email and phone to stay in contact as well as visiting them regularly in their area.

Young people have pathway plans that provide information and a plan to meet their needs, but, for a small number, these are not done early enough. Most pathway plans are not updated regularly enough and do not reflect the most recent circumstances or events. Often during this visit, personal advisers were able to talk about the work they were doing which was meeting the young person's current needs, but this is not reflected in the plan or recorded well. This makes it difficult for anyone else to understand the young person's needs and how workers hoped the support would help them.

For young people under 18, there are some good and thorough examples of pathway plans being reviewed, with young people attending their review meetings. Reviews demonstrate that there is focus on both what is needed in relation to the needs of and risks to the young person and the practical actions that are needed to be taken. However, there is little evidence of formal reviews of pathway planning for young people aged 18–21. This, combined with weaker monitoring in supervision, results in some drift and delay in resolving issues for some young people.

Personal advisers work to address young people's needs and help them to access the right services. Outcomes for some young people were positive, but for others with complex issues from previous experiences, progress in improving outcomes is limited. The experiences of young people seen during this visit mirror the recent data provided by the local authority, with 55% of young people in education, employment and training. Where young people struggle to maintain education placements or employment, this is often due to emotional health and well-being needs caused by their previous life experiences. While some young people are receiving support, there is not yet a coherent and consistent provision of effective support to ensure that all young people can recover and go on to achieve their best.

All young people seen during this visit were living in appropriate accommodation, with several accessing staying put arrangements with their previous foster carers to give them ongoing stability and support.

There is evidence of regular supervision taking place in the care leavers' team but recording of this is not sufficiently detailed or evaluative and does not always ensure actions are followed through or effectively monitored.

Young people aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless do not currently undergo a joint assessment of their needs by housing services and children's social care. Work is undertaken by social workers to find out about young people's circumstances and decide if they need accommodation and additional support. However, not all young people are offered the opportunity to become looked after, even when they have significant histories of involvement with children's social care.

For some young people, the provision of accommodation and some additional support as part of a multi-agency child in need plan is effective and improves their outcomes. For other more vulnerable young people, not having the option to become a child in care leaves them disadvantaged and without assurance that support will be ongoing into adulthood. Concerns about the response to this group of young people resulted in a recommendation at the last inspection. The local authority has been too slow to make improvements to this area of service, with a joint protocol between children's social care and housing service only launched during this visit.

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

Yours sincerely

Paula Thomson-Jones
Her Majesty's Inspector