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Ms Sue Harrison
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Dear Ms Harrison

Focused visit to Central Bedfordshire Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Central Bedfordshire Council children's services on 5 and 6 February 2019. The inspectors were Margaret Burke, HMI, and Nick Stacey, HMI.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in care, assessing the quality of practice and children's experiences and progress. This aspect of service was judged as requiring improvement to be good at the last inspection.

Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including children's case records and case discussions with social workers and team managers. They met with representatives from the children in care council (CiCC). They also looked at the local authority's children in care performance management and quality assurance information.

Overview

The local authority has used the last inspection in 2017 as a catalyst to drive improvement. Senior leaders have remained open to external scrutiny, challenging themselves and remaining focused on doing the best for their children and young people.

Children in care are looked after well in homes which meet their needs. Most children live in stable family placements, go to good schools and have opportunities to pursue hobbies and try out new things. Children see their social workers regularly. Social workers work hard to support them to do well. Managers ensure that children continue to receive the support that they need to be their best. Care planning is responsive to children's changing needs; their care plans are updated regularly and in response to any changes and difficulties. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) routinely challenge when work is not followed through and children are not making

progress. However, more work is required to ensure that quality assurance processes result in improved outcomes for children and that they receive timely health assessments.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- Auditing arrangements are still underdeveloped. The views of social workers, parents and children are not fully integrated into the auditing cycle. Learning from audits and from feedback is not effectively driving and improving practice.
- The local authority's processes for delivering health assessments need to improve, to ensure children's health needs are quickly identified and addressed. This was a recommendation from the last inspection.

Findings

- Children come into care when it is in their best interests to do so. Social workers conduct a full assessment of risks and seek to understand children's needs, carefully judging whether the child can safely return to parents or other family members. Social workers work respectfully with parents. Early consideration is given to children's legal status and the full range of orders are considered and used appropriately to secure children's futures.
- Social workers routinely update children's assessment reports, ensuring their reviews are informed by a full and up-to-date picture of children's needs. These reports are informative and evaluative, drawing from the views of the child and their wider network to present a clear picture of the child in their placement. Children's progress is recognised, and close attention is paid to their achievement over the preceding six months.
- The local authority's performance in providing timely initial and review health assessments has slipped during the last year. Social workers and managers, however, continue to track children's health appointments in their assessment updates and through case supervision. When required, they chase for new appointments to be offered, minimising the impact on children of any delay.
- Children's plans are detailed. They involve health and education partners well and are time specific. Most plans demonstrate a considered understanding of the impact of previous trauma, the current experiences of the child, and aspirations for the future. This approach to planning helps children think beyond their current challenges and builds hope for their future. Planning documents clearly record work carried out and the timeliness of completion. Contingencies are considered well in plans.
- Children are supported to make progress in their education and, for most, the personal education plan (PEP) is used well as a tool to support this. Most PEPs provide a strong sense of how well children are doing, and targets for the next period are agreed and reviewed on a termly basis. However, for a small number

of children, identified areas in the PEP have either not led to appropriate actions or are not followed through. The involvement of the virtual school is less evident in driving the education and achievement of young people in post-16 education.

- Children's placements are stable, and children are less likely to experience frequent moves because of the support they and their carers receive. Children whose cases were reviewed at this visit had a permanence plan in place and these were being monitored and progressed. Brothers and sisters' assessments are completed without delay, leading to timely decisions regarding placement combinations. Family finders are promptly allocated to each child and to foster carers to consider plans for long-term placements. Permanence panel meetings take place early in children's care experiences and notes of these meetings reflect the comprehensive range of options considered.
- Managers and IROs provide effective reflective challenge and robust monitoring of children's plans, in a manner that social workers regard as strong and supportive. There is also evidence in children's records of appropriate oversight and authorisations from senior managers. Supervision is exemplary across the teams. Case management supervision includes permanence planning, so that key dates, tasks and actions are kept under review and new timescales set for any work not completed. This helps to prevent drift and delay.
- Social workers support children well. They visit frequently, spend time getting to know them, and understand their needs. Visits increase in response to need and when issues arise. Direct work with all children is of a high standard. Social workers use a range of tools, including some designed specifically to meet the needs of disabled children, to help draw out their views and help children understand their day-to-day situations and challenges. Social workers take follow-up action in response to children's views.
- Social workers take time to explain to children why they are in care and to support them to understand their family and care history. Life-story work is expertly conducted. Photographs, pictures and stories depicting the child's history are used sensitively with the child as they journey together through the child's background and history. This is done with consideration given to the age of children. Life-story work is revisited at appropriate times in the child's life to update records and children's knowledge of their families and history.
- Children are kept busy on useful activities. They enjoy a variety of activities and have plenty of opportunities to have fun. The local authority is clearly focused on recognising and celebrating children's achievement.
- An impressive group of confident young people provide a voice for children in care and lead on developments and initiatives, improving standards and enhancing the offers available to them. Members of the CiCC speak highly of senior managers and councillors and have an equally high regard for social

workers and team managers, who the council sees as approachable and supportive.

- Politicians have a good understanding of the challenges children face. They take their corporate parenting role seriously and, in some instances, use their own resources to support children's requests. They can demonstrate how they challenge and hold senior leaders across the council to account, while willingly allowing the CiCC to hold them to account. A young person from the CiCC co-chairs the corporate parenting panel, strengthening the children's voice and getting things that are important to children in care on politicians' and senior managers' agendas.
- Progress in relation to key performance indicators continues to remain strong in most areas, apart from the timeliness of initial health assessments for children. Leaders have identified the reasons for this dip in performance and have plans in place to address this.
- The local authority has successfully created the culture where workers are open to professional challenge and reflection to improve and strengthen practice. Managers now routinely complete monthly audits. However, other parts of the auditing process are still in the development stages and are not fully implemented.
- Social workers told inspectors that they like working for Central Bedfordshire. They describe a continuity of supportive management and manageable caseloads. This correlates with workforce data, which indicates low staff turnover and low agency rates. Many children have had the same social worker and IRO for over two years and have been able to get to know, trust and build good relationships with them. Frontline workers are well supported to access continuous learning and development, with many supported to access postgraduate training.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning your next inspection or visit. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Margaret Burke

Her Majesty's Inspector