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Dear Annie

Focused visit to Lambeth local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Lambeth local authority children's services on 9 and 10 April 2019. The inspectors were Andy Whippey, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Dawn Godfrey, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Inspectors evaluated the quality of care planning for children in care and the timeliness of permanence arrangements for children who are unable to live with their birth parents.

A range of evidence was considered during the visit, which included discussions with social workers and their managers and looking at children's case files. Inspectors also met with independent reviewing officers (IROs) and managers who are involved in public law outline planning for those children who meet the threshold for care proceedings. They reviewed the quality of support that is available to foster carers. In addition, they evaluated relevant performance information and quality assurance arrangements, and the effectiveness of supervision, management oversight and support to frontline social work staff.

Overview

Senior leadership in Lambeth is robust and there is a determination to improve outcomes for children and young people in the care of the local authority. The quality of permanence planning is improving. Children are seen regularly, and some are benefiting from more timely intervention. However, senior managers recognise that there is still a considerable amount of work to do to ensure effective and timely permanence planning for all children and young people.

Senior managers make increasingly good use of data and audits to give them a good understanding of the quality of service. They have developed clear and realistic

action plans to achieve the necessary improvements. Tangible progress is evident in the adoption service, which was judged inadequate at the last inspection in 2018, and the timescales have improved significantly for most of the children who have been adopted recently. Social workers are very positive about working in Lambeth and have good access to training.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- Early permanence planning.
- Oversight of permanence planning by IROs and managers.
- The quality and timeliness of permanence planning meetings.
- The support offer to foster carers.
- Performance data relating to permanence.

Findings

- Early permanence planning is improving, but it is not yet consistently embedded within social work practice. This leads to delay for some children, as options such as foster to adopt, family group conferences and connected persons assessments are not explored concurrently.
- The timeliness of the progression of plans for children with an identified adoption plan has improved significantly since the last inspection, although a minority of children subject to a placement order still experience delay in being matched with an adoptive family.
- Children in pre-proceedings are tracked effectively. This ensures that plans do not drift, and timely decisions are made to initiate proceedings when necessary. Planning within pre-proceedings is still too sequential and permanence planning does not always take place at an early enough stage. Family group conferences are not routinely considered alongside other options.
- Decisions to return children to their families are appropriate and are informed by culturally sensitive direct work with both children and parents.
- For some children subject to care orders who are placed under the placement with parents regulations there is no up-to-date assessment to inform permanence planning, and insufficient management oversight.
- Decisions to change children's permanence plans away from adoption are appropriate and well considered, although in a minority of cases these decisions could have been made earlier.

- Managers have a system for tracking permanence. However, actions identified at permanence panels are not recorded consistently on children's case records. In many cases, permanence planning meetings are not happening regularly and when they do, they are not effective in determining actions to ensure that plans for permanence are implemented. This includes planning for children who are accommodated.
- An increasing number of children are leaving care due to the granting of special guardianship orders. Most special guardianship and connected persons assessments are thorough, and better examples include social work analysis woven throughout. Assessments are child-focused and demonstrate an understanding of children's needs and how the carer will meet those needs. They are completed in a timely way to ensure that there is no delay in planning for children. Support plans are clear about what carers can expect and how they will be supported.
- IROs, while increasingly active in planning for children, are not routinely tracking the progress of permanence plans. IROs are not sufficiently challenging when permanence planning meetings are not taking place and/or when actions are not being completed in a timely manner.
- A small number of children and young people have been in foster care for a long time without a formal matching arrangement. This means that managers cannot be assured that these arrangements are meeting children's needs in the longer term, and the children do not have the benefit of a secure placement.
- Contact arrangements for the majority of children are well managed and are informed by the child's wishes and needs. Social workers ensure that enduring family relationships are maintained when it is safe and appropriate to do so. The importance of supporting relationships between fathers and children is recognised and contact with brothers and sisters is well considered and promoted.
- Social workers visit children regularly, mostly within the local authority's expected timescales, and they see them alone when appropriate. Visits to children are mostly well recorded and include consideration of children's wishes and feelings. However, there is some variability in the depth, quality and content of records. In some cases, there is no analysis of the visit, which would help to inform future planning for children, or a record of actions resulting from such visits.
- While some improvements have been made to the timeliness of completion of life-story work, this is not consistent. Senior managers are ensuring that social workers have access to good-quality training on life-story work.
- Some children have experienced too many changes of social worker, and this has impacted on the pace of permanence planning. Senior managers are continuing to be proactive in securing a permanent and stable workforce.

- Social workers are very positive about working in Lambeth. They report regular supervision and good access to managers, including senior managers, who support them well. Supervision records show that children's circumstances are discussed, although in some records there is little evidence of analysis. There is often a lack of clarity about the actions needed to improve the quality of planning and outcomes for children. Progress against actions is not being routinely explored in subsequent supervision sessions in order to avoid drift in care planning. Management actions and decisions, including those made by senior managers, are not always recorded clearly.
- Staff morale in Lambeth is high. Staff have good access to a wide range of induction and training opportunities. Staff development is prioritised and encouraged. These opportunities, coupled with manageable caseloads, provide space for staff to reflect and focus on practice improvement.
- Foster carers benefit from a wide-ranging training programme. Senior managers recognise that the support package offered to carers is not so well developed, for example out-of-hours provision and access to a wider range of support groups and therapeutic input.
- A wide range of performance data is collated and used effectively to identify areas where performance is a concern. However, there is insufficient collation of information to ensure effective oversight of permanence planning, for example regarding the frequency of permanence planning meetings and the number of children who have a permanence plan in place by their second looked after review.
- Senior managers undertake a range of audit activity, and this helps them to have an accurate understanding of the quality of social work practice. However, the actions being taken to improve practice are not sufficiently comprehensive, which means that the impact of audits in improving outcomes for children is limited.

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

Yours sincerely

Andy Whippey
Her Majesty's Inspector