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27 September 2019

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Dear Ms Bradshaw

Focused visit to Shropshire local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Shropshire local authority children's services on 4 and 5 September 2019. The inspectors were Peter McEntee, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Alison Smale, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for achieving permanence.

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

Overview

Since its last inspection in 2017, the local authority has made progress in improving services for children who need permanent arrangements for their care.

For almost all children who come into care, swift decisions are made about their permanent care plans. The local authority is successful in ensuring that most children who cannot live with their parents are placed quickly in alternative living arrangements, including placements with relatives (connected carers), adoption, long-term fostering and, for a few, specialist residential living.

Placement stability has improved, with fewer children experiencing multiple moves. Adoption is carefully considered for all children who cannot return home. Brothers and sisters are placed together whenever possible and adoption disruption is rare. Special guardianship orders (SGO) are considered for children living in long-term fostering arrangements. Plans for children in care who are living with their parents

under placement with parents (PWP) regulations are not sufficiently clear about what parents need to do to achieve good enough standards of parenting.

Senior leaders have implemented the use of a permanency tracking tool, but it is not yet able to provide the local authority with enough information to allow a fully effective analysis of performance. The recently developed permanency forum is not yet embedded sufficiently to ensure a management overview of all relevant cases.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The functioning of the permanency tracker to ensure that it enables the local authority to analyse practice and progress towards permanence.
- A greater understanding among staff of the purpose of the permanency forum and a review of its scope to ensure that PWP arrangements are considered in the forum on a regular basis.
- That recorded outcomes of reviews of children looked after arrangements have actions that are bounded by timescales for completion, and all expectations of parents are made clear in recommendations.

Findings

- Progress and improvements have been made since the last inspection. Senior managers and staff have a clear understanding of the importance of making permanent living arrangements for children coming into care as quickly as possible. As a result, almost all children have a plan for permanence at, or close to, their second children looked after review.
- Children are placed in permanent placements quickly, with very few experiencing multiple moves before finding a good-quality permanent home. The implementation of a placement stability panel has had a significant impact on reducing placement moves for children. Few children looked after who are considered by the placement stability panel have experienced three or more placements in the time they have been in care.
- Almost all children are considered for adoption where this is appropriate, and the local authority is successful in placing groups of brothers and sisters, older children and those who have significant health needs. There has been only one disruption in the last two years, and the number of rescinded plans is low. Although numbers are small, the local authority has used fostering to adopt successfully, enabling children to be placed in permanent homes at the earliest possible stage.
- The local authority undertakes parallel planning for children's futures. Long-term alternative homes are sought for children during care proceedings, reducing the possibility of delay in determining where they will finally live. However, for a small

number of children, early opportunities to parallel plan were missed by social workers and managers, and this resulted in delay in securing permanence for these children.

- Leaders and managers ensure that viability assessments of relatives and connected carers are used effectively to promote children's opportunities to live safely or keep in touch with their extended family.
- The local authority is successful in achieving permanence and legal stability by seeking special guardianship orders for children already living in established long-term foster care or with their connected carers. It does not, however, always ensure that discussions about this possibility are clearly recorded. This makes it difficult to establish, in some cases, whether this option has been discussed and, where appropriate, revisited.
- Children with disabilities who are in care have their permanence plans considered on a timely basis. At the age of 16, they are allocated a worker from adult services to reinforce long-term planning for their care arrangements after they become 19. This supportive joint working is helping to provide a more seamless service for these young people and an easier transition to adulthood and continuing care.
- Plans for children in care who are placed with parents are too generic. The expectations of parents and what they need to do to improve or maintain good parenting are insufficiently clear or detailed.
- Children's assessments of need are updated regularly. Many of these are detailed and provide a clear analysis of children's current needs and, where necessary, a review of the current care plan. Care plans are up to date in almost all cases and are clear about a child's plan for permanence. However, plans often lack timescales for actions to be completed. While no detriment to individual children was seen, this means that, particularly in complex cases, the progress of the plan can be difficult to follow.
- Children looked after reviews are held within statutory timescales, but many lack clear timescales for taking actions. Review minutes often refer to other documents as sources containing more details about issues and actions. This means that minutes and recommendations are unclear for parents, older children and social workers. This in turn may lead to confusion about what is expected of whom and by when.
- Social workers' case supervision is inconsistent in quality. The best examples detail reflective discussion and include clear actions and timescales for completion. Some poorer examples, however, are very brief and contain little direction or reflection. In case management teams, there are gaps in supervision, in some cases for several months. This means that front-line managers are not

always providing critical evaluation and challenge, and in a small number of cases progressing decisions, relating to children's permanence plans.

- Social workers know their children well and understand their needs and personalities. Children benefit from carers who are well supported through a range of effective and valued services such as the carer intervention specialist. This service effectively supports carers when children's needs are more complex. If there is potential instability in a child's permanent home, this is identified, and a package of support is provided through the placement stability meeting.
- Senior managers have implemented a number of initiatives to improve the overall scrutiny of permanence planning and the effectiveness of practice. This includes a permanency tracker, but its use is limited as a tool for analysis, as there is insufficient data in place to allow this. On this basis, it is not yet useful as a strategic tool that enables the authority to identify any weaknesses in practice or in its processes. A permanency forum operates to ensure that early permanence plans are in place. However, it is not yet embedded, and some staff are unsure about its purpose and function. The cases of children in care living at home with their parents are presently not reviewed by the forum and this is a missed opportunity as the permanence plans for these children are not formally resolved.
- Leaders and managers undertake regular monitoring activity through case and thematic audits, which has included a focus on permanence planning and practice. This has provided them with an accurate understanding of the quality of practice in the authority and how much progress has been made towards good-quality permanence work.

Thank you and your staff for the positive engagement with the focused visit. 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