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Dear Dawn

Monitoring visit to Wandsworth children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to the London Borough of Wandsworth children's services on 19 and 20 September 2017. The visit was the fifth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate for overall effectiveness in December 2015. The inspectors were Brenda McLaughlin HMI and Marcie Taylor HMI.

The visit focused on the quality of permanence arrangements for children who are unable to live with their birth families. While inspectors found some strengths, they also found a lack of timeliness in providing permanent alternative homes. Many of the essential components are in place to ensure continuing progress, but the quality of practice remains too variable. Senior leaders accept that more work is required by all teams to make sure that permanence planning and family finding for children are carried out at the earliest opportunity.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made regarding children looked after, including:

- the quality of care planning for children looked after, in particular the achievement of timely permanence for all children who are unable to live with their birth families
- the recruitment, assessment and support of adopters, foster carers, special guardians and connected persons
- the effectiveness of the independent reviewing officers (IROs) in ensuring that permanence plans for children are achieved without delay
- management oversight of practice, including the use and effectiveness of performance management and quality assurance information

- the effectiveness of the adoption panel and the agency decision-maker (ADM) in ensuring that children are matched with the most appropriate families.

Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, supervision files and notes. We reviewed improvement plans, adoption panel minutes and performance information, and we commented on the effectiveness of management oversight. In addition, we spoke to a range of staff, including heads of service, managers and social workers.

Overview

Senior leaders have recognised that family-finding activity is not initiated soon enough and they are taking decisive action to address the delays in securing permanent alternative homes for children in care. There is a high volume of assessments of connected persons, and too many are requested at a late stage in care proceedings. Some of these requests are court directed but, for many children, family members could be identified sooner through more proactive family group conferencing and explicit expectations for parents in the pre-proceedings phase of the Public Law Outline (PLO). Insufficient reliable data and performance information are impacting on the ability of managers to drive improvements effectively.

Findings and evaluation of progress

The number of children placed for adoption remains low, but is increasing. This low figure is partly due to an underdeveloped understanding and application of early permanence through foster to adopt arrangements and a lack of consistent consideration of parallel plans for all children. An externally commissioned review in May 2017 found that young children waited too long to be placed. For example, a fifth of infants (aged 0–3 months when they became looked after) waited an average of 28 months before being placed with their adoptive families. Four adoptive households, which had been approved in 2014–15, were still waiting to be matched with a child at the time of the review. These are considerable delays for adopters, leading to missed opportunities to pursue adoption quickly for some children.

Managers at all levels are hindered by inconsistent data in their understanding of the quality of practice in relation to permanence for children. A permanency tracker has been developed on the new children's services electronic system. This is intended to enable managers to track the progress of cases through the PLO process, from legal planning meeting to final hearing. This work on the tracker is recent and needs to be progressed urgently. In the children looked after service, management grip on the quality of practice is not sufficiently rigorous.

A recently established monthly forum has resulted in more robust management oversight at each stage of the adoption process. Any drift in progressing plans is now being appropriately escalated to the assistant director of children's services.

An in-house audit of cases in August 2017 identified that, while 232 out of the total children in care population of 289 had permanence plans, there was delay in finding families and matching children for a number of younger children who cannot live with their birth parents. Managers accept that a holistic, strategic approach is required immediately to address the delays across teams. A revised permanence strategy and urgent action to prioritise permanence decisions and involve the family finding team at every stage of the child's journey are being implemented.

The adoption and permanence panel is well established and quorate, and demonstrates appropriate challenge and exploration of the strengths and vulnerabilities of applicants. It is suitably interrogative of the plans and assessments presented. Minutes, clearly laid out, show a detailed rationale for the panel recommendations. ADM decisions are timely and comprehensive. They demonstrate rigour and appropriate child-centred deliberation in the approval of applicants and in agreeing matches for children. The quality of prospective adopter reports (PARs) sampled by inspectors is good, demonstrating considered analysis of the strengths and vulnerabilities of prospective adopters. The PARs are thorough and suitably probing.

Child permanence records and matching reports are comprehensive and child-specific. Recent assessments of connected persons, using the structured approach seen in PARs, are resulting in well-evidenced recommendations about the suitability of connected persons to care for children. It is clear how children's needs will be met at the point of placement and as they grow. Post-permanence support is accessible and tailored to need. Therapeutic support is prioritised and provided as necessary to help children who have complex needs to remain within their permanent families.

The quality of social work practice with children in care is continuing to improve, particularly when social workers are permanent or have been allocated to the case for a significant time. Most children are seen regularly and on their own. However, some children are unable to develop trusting relationships with their social worker due to staff turnover. Two areas for development and improvement identified during the last monitoring visit were the timeliness and quality of IRO minutes and records. In cases sampled on this visit, inspectors saw evidence of improvements. For example, most statutory review records are comprehensive, children's views are recorded and care plans are clear. However, the work by IROs in consistently challenging drift in care planning and in independently monitoring local authority performance lacks rigour.

As reported at the monitoring visit in May 2017, activity by the fostering service to recruit and retain foster carers, clearly aligned to the updated placement sufficiency strategy, is a strength. There are 45 prospective foster carer families at different stages of assessment, and increased financial support in recognition of caring for older children who have more complex needs has been agreed. There are currently 68 households offering 95 places; reviews are held on time and social workers carry out announced and unannounced visits, providing enhanced safeguarding scrutiny.

Carers have access to training and benefit from support from the intensive intervention team, which supports carers to look after children who have complex behavioural and emotional needs.

In summary, the progress that inspectors have seen in other areas on previous monitoring visits is not yet fully reflected in achieving permanence soon enough for some vulnerable children. Senior leaders and all staff who met with inspectors are working diligently to address these deficits. They continue to convey considerable ambition, confidence and determination to consistently improve the quality of help, care and protection that they provide to children looked after.

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

Yours sincerely

Brenda McLaughlin
Her Majesty's Inspector