

The Axis Building
10 Holliday Street
Birmingham
B1 1TF

T 0300 123 1231
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



5 March 2018

Ms Sue Butcher
Acting Director of Children's Services
The Council House
Priory Road
Dudley
West Midlands
DY1 1HF

Dear Sue

Monitoring visit of Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Dudley children's services on 8 and 9 February 2018. The visit was the fifth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in April 2016. The visit was carried out by Andy Waugh and Pauline Higham, Her Majesty's Inspectors and Sue Williams, Ofsted Inspector.

The local authority continues to make positive progress in improving services for children and young people.

Areas covered by the visit

During this visit, inspectors reviewed the effectiveness of services for children who need an alternative family, with a particular focus on adoption. The quality of social work practice was reviewed by looking at social work assessments and care plans for children looked after. Inspectors looked at the quality of child permanence reports and prospective adopter's reports; this included reviewing the effectiveness of matching children to their adopters. The arrangements for tracking and monitoring the progress of individual children through the 'achieving early permanence' panel were also considered.

The visit considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, supervision files and notes, and direct observation of the 'achieving early permanence' panel. Inspectors spoke to a range of staff including managers, social workers, the independent chair of the adoption panel and a small number of carers.

Overview

The local authority has worked hard to ensure that the importance of securing early permanence for children looked after is embedded across the children's workforce. Improved tracking and monitoring systems provide the opportunity for social workers and managers to consider all permanence options for children who have recently entered care. The positive work of the two permanence coordinators, and a dynamic adoption panel adviser has resulted in an improved focus on permanence planning. The majority of children are now achieving permanence through adoption in a timely way. There remains a small number of children who have been looked after for a number of years, who have not yet achieved permanence. The local authority has identified these children, and they are working systematically to improve their outcomes. This work is not yet complete. Despite the improvements, particularly for children who have recently become looked after, a small number of children in Dudley are not yet achieving permanence at the earliest opportunity.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Senior leaders, social workers and managers continue to demonstrate a commitment to improving outcomes for children in Dudley. Overall, the quality of social work practice continues to improve. Social workers consistently told inspectors that they feel supported and enabled to fulfil their roles. Managers accurately assess the quality of social work practice through their audit activity, and they ensure that any learning is disseminated to the workforce. This is improving the quality of practice and outcomes for children.

Risk to children are effectively identified and responded to. Social work practice is child centred, as social workers are more consistently capturing the child's lived experience in assessments and plans. Management oversight is evident on the majority of cases. However, in a small number of cases, inspectors saw that managers and independent reviewing officers do not always challenge practice to address drift in case progression. For a small number of children, permanence plans do not progress as swiftly as they should.

Despite an overall improvement in management oversight, formal supervision between team managers and social workers is not always regular and does not always set timescales for actions to be undertaken. Supervision is not yet reflective, and it does not always fully take into account social worker's developmental needs. This is an area that requires improvement.

The timescales for children achieving permanence through adoption has improved, and this is a positive picture. However, for a small number of children, opportunities have been missed to achieve early permanence. This, at times, has resulted in delay for these children. The local authority has identified this issue and work is underway to secure the most appropriate plan for every child.

Child permanence reports provide an accurate picture of the child. Some assessments effectively detail the child's birth and family history, with a clear analysis of their permanence needs. In a small number of assessments, chronologies miss important details, resulting in a lack of analysis to ensure children's experiences and needs are fully understood.

During the visit, inspectors saw good quality assessments of prospective adopters, with a balance of description and analysis, supporting children to be appropriately matched. Assessing social workers in Dudley have a detailed understanding of adopter's needs and strengths, and this means that they are suitably matched to children.

The adoption panel arrangements provide robust independent challenge. Children are matched appropriately with prospective adopters who are able to meet their needs. The agency decision maker makes timely decisions based on comprehensive panel recommendations. The quality assurance minutes of the panel advisor has noted improvements in the quality of child permanence reports.

Adoption introduction plans for children seen were sensitive and comprehensive, varying in accordance with children's individual needs. Consideration was given to the impact of children leaving their foster carers as they move to their permanent homes. Children's life story books are child friendly and sensitive and later life letters are completed well. However, these pieces of work are not always completed in a timely way, and this means that children's important information is not always provided at the appropriate time.

The local authority's improvement plan continues to focus on better outcomes for children. Senior leaders and managers are proud of the progress that has been made; however, they are also aware that further improvements are required to ensure that all children consistently receive the support they need.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you and your staff for your positive engagement with the programme of monitoring visits.

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

Yours sincerely

Andy Waugh
Her Majesty's Inspector