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Dear Mr Gray

Focused visit to Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council children's services on 17 and 18 April 2018. The inspectors were Brenda McInerney HMI and Matt Reed HMI.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for permanency planning and achieving permanence for children in care, with a particular focus on early permanence, long-term foster care and kinship care. At the time of the visit, the local authority was in the process of joining the newly formed Tees Valley Regional Adoption Agency.

Inspectors also evaluated the effectiveness of performance management, management oversight, supervision, quality assurance and the continuous professional development of the workforce.

Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers and an evaluation of children's case records. They also looked at local authority performance management, examples of case file audits and observed a scrutiny panel. The findings in this letter relate only to cases seen during this visit.

Overview

There is strong political and corporate support for children in care in Stockton-on-Tees. Children are in placements that meet their needs. There has been improvement in children achieving permanency since the last inspection as a result

of concerted focus on preventing drift and delay. The local authority recognises that the quality of social work practice is inconsistent. As part of a culture of continuous improvement, leaders had developed clear plans to address these areas.

The local authority understands itself well and had already recognised most strengths and areas for improvement identified by inspectors. The development of the performance information within the continuous improvement framework allows senior leaders to track the progress of children achieving permanence.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- All children's reviews should outline a clear permanence plan, with specific actions detailing how and when this will be achieved. Where there are delays in children achieving permanency, this should be robustly challenged by independent reviewing officers.
- The local authority may wish to review the overall timescale arrangements, quality of reports and legal consultation to ensure robust permanence plans for children are placed before the court to better meet regional and court expectations.
- Assessments of carers, including connected persons and special guardians, should take in to consideration the carer's ability to meet the child's needs for the whole of the child's life into adulthood.
- Monthly audits have, for the most part, not considered the experience of children achieving permanency and the quality of social work practice within permanency planning. The very small number of audits completed were over optimistic about practice and not focused on outcomes for children.

Findings

- Since 2017, there has been a strategic drive around improving permanency planning, with a suite of new policies and procedures, staff workshops and training around achieving permanence in all its forms. However, a very low level of case audits has limited an understanding of progress in implementing recent approaches in permanence planning.
- The progress of children's permanence plans is being supported through monthly 'care team' meetings chaired by the children's social workers. For children who have achieved permanence, these meetings provide additional support to promote placement stability. A wide range of partners are very well engaged with these meetings.
- Parallel planning for very young children is promoting early permanence. However, this could happen more quickly for children identified pre-birth, and

while fostering for adoption is being discussed with social workers, this still needs to be developed further.

- Children's wishes and feelings are captured in their assessments, plans and meetings. Social workers undertake purposeful direct work and children's views inform the decisions about their care. Many, but not all, children in foster care are benefiting from sensitive work to help them understand their life stories.
- There has been some progress in developing practice around parallel or twin tracking of permanence options for children, with early preparation of child permanence reports and long-term fostering assessments. The local authority recognised that twin tracking can be in name only, with not all plans being actively progressed. An early notification procedure of children's proposed permanence plans to the child placement team is resulting in improved early family finding.
- The local authority launched an edge of care service at the end of January 2018, including support for permanence through reunification with birth families. At the time of this visit, it was too early for inspectors to evaluate the impact.
- Children's assessments and matching reports often include too much detail about the child's previous history and not enough analysis of current and future needs. In particular, their therapeutic needs following abusive and traumatic experiences are not clearly set out. As a result, not all care planning sufficiently addresses this area of need.
- There is careful matching to appropriate permanent carers and children benefit from a high degree of stability in placements. At the time of the visit, very few children were waiting to be matched with permanent foster carers.
- Since the previous inspection in 2016, increasing numbers of children have been achieving permanence through living with special guardians or have been subject to child arrangement orders. The local authority is aware that for some children there are delays in securing permanency due to the capacity of social workers.
- There is a sufficient range of placements to support children being placed with their brothers and sisters when this is assessed as being in their best interests. Children's plans include arrangements for safe and enjoyable contact with family members when appropriately supported by a dedicated contact service.
- Social workers receive regular supervision and have reflective discussions about children's need for permanence. However, this does not always translate into specific and timely action to prevent drift and delay. Social workers spoke positively about the impact of recent training and workshops with the theme of children achieving permanence. The local authority has been successful in recruiting and retaining experienced social workers and has a low number of agency social workers.

- There is consistent management oversight of the permanency planning process, and team managers are able to closely track the progress of children's plans. However, some forums such as scrutiny panel would provide additional benefit from having an earlier oversight of the proposed permanence plans for children.

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

Yours sincerely

Brenda McInerney

Her Majesty's Inspector