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Dear Cathy Rooney

Focused visit to Trafford Metropolitan Borough children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Trafford Metropolitan Borough children's services on 10 and 11 July 2018. The inspectors were Pauline Higham, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Shabana Abasi, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for achieving permanence in accordance with the inspection of local authority children's services framework (ILACS). Specifically, they considered children whose permanence was secured by returning to their birth families, adoption, connected carers placements, long-term fostering and residential care.

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

Overview

There have been recent political and senior management changes at Trafford. Internal expertise has been utilised well to provide stability, consistency and a continued focus to improve service delivery for children and their families. Leaders understand the strengths and weakness of their services and use this knowledge well to identify areas for development.

The local authority is currently delivering against a targeted transformation plan to implement a whole-system approach to permanence, including early permanence. Early positive impact for children is evident through the increasing numbers of children becoming adopted or being made subject to Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs), Children Act 1989, and through more children being safely discharged to their family homes. The transformation of services has included adding capacity to specific functions to achieve earlier permanence for children.

Multi-agency working is strong, and there is a clear joint focus on achieving improved outcomes for children. When permanence needs are identified for children and families, there is a sufficient range of effective services to support children and families in their placements. The local authority has developed a strong suite of performance data to support their permanence work. Leaders and managers use this well to inform their planning for, and delivery of, services.

Quality assurance activity, through audit, does not currently provide an up-to-date overview of practice, and management oversight through supervision is not always evident on children's case records. Staff feel supported by their managers and told inspectors that they feel listened to when discussing their day-to-day practice and development. Staff feel valued and morale is good.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- Timely decision-making and completion of assessments to progress permanence for children who are being cared for by connected persons through SGO.
- Updating children's assessments to ensure that planning for children is informed by a full analysis of children's current circumstances.
- Formal escalation by independent reviewing officers (IROs) in order to minimise drift and delay for children.
- Support all children with a plan for permanence to understand their journey and history by ensuring that there is a consistent and planned approach to direct work.
- Further development and training to improve the efficiency of the fostering panel.

Findings

- All relevant options for children's permanence, including adoption, are considered and clear rationales for decisions are recorded on the child's case record. Assessments of whether it is in the best interests for brothers and sisters to live together are appropriate. They balance well the importance of

supporting enduring brother and sister relationships against the long-term needs of the individual children. Social workers successfully assess all family members in a timely way to determine whether it is in children's best interests to remain living within their family.

- Multi-agency working is effective and timely information sharing between professionals leads to appropriate services being provided to support children. Working relationships with schools are a particular strength. Children's emotional health and well-being are well supported by the Healthy Young Minds service.
- There are delays for some children when a placement order has been granted and they are waiting to be matched with an adoptive family. There has been some delay in securing SGOs for children in connected carers placements in some instances. For some children, this delay has been over a number of years. There is also some delay in decision-making to progress to an SGO and subsequent delay in completing some assessments of children's needs for those children living with connected carers. This means that some children continue to receive a statutory social work intervention when they no longer require this.
- Contact arrangements for the majority of children are well managed and are informed by the child's wishes and needs. Through strong focus by social workers, enduring family relationships for children are maintained when it is safe and appropriate to do so. The importance of fathers' relationships with children is recognised and risk assessments are used effectively to promote safe contact. Brother and sister contact is well considered and promoted.
- Children with a plan for adoption benefit from tenacious family finding, child-centred life-story work and later-life letters, as well as strong collaborative liaison between adoption support social workers and children's social workers. Adoption support plans are clear and comprehensive. Decisions to change children's permanence plans away from adoption are made when this is right for the child.
- IROs continue to chair children's review meetings if cases step down to children in need after having been in care and this provides a strong sense of continuity for children, families and other professionals. However, IROs do not always share the minutes from these meetings in a timely way. This means that partner agencies and families are not clear about what is expected from them and they cannot hold each other to account for follow-through of actions to improve outcomes for children.
- IROs visit and speak with children to ascertain their views as part of the review process. Review meetings for children in care are attended by relevant professionals. This means that decisions for children are well informed and that the discussions translate into clear plans for children. However, there is little

evidence of robust and formal escalation of concerns by IROs when drift and delay is evident in progressing children's plans.

- Senior leaders have developed services to support achieving improved permanence outcomes for children. They reviewed the structure of teams and reorganised the family placement team to create defined roles to promote permanence for children. Early indications are that this is helping to secure the right permanence option for increasing numbers of children.
- Caseloads for some social workers are too high. This impacts on their capacity to undertake assessments and means that support and intervention for children in need are not always timely while social workers prioritise their higher risk cases. This means that there is delay in identifying and responding to some children's needs.
- Audit activity across children's services is not routinely undertaken each month. This does not enable the local authority to gain a comprehensive overview of current permanence practice or to address any issues as they arise. The local authority identified that the audit process needed to change, and a new quality assurance framework outlines how this will be addressed in the future.
- While appropriate decisions for children are made at fostering panel, the minutes are not reviewed at subsequent panels to ensure that actions have been followed through. Not all panel members have received their annual appraisals, and leaders recognise that there is further development and training required to improve the efficiency of fostering panel.

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

Yours sincerely

Pauline Higham
Her Majesty's Inspector