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Dear Mark

Focused visit to Cheshire East local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Cheshire East local authority children's services on 30 and 31 October 2018. The inspectors were Stella Elliott and Lisa Summers, Her Majesty's Inspectors.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for permanency planning and achieving permanence, with a specific focus on children in residential and foster care, and on children on care orders who are placed at home with parents.

Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers, meetings with independent reviewing officers and senior managers, and telephone discussions with Cafcass and a district judge. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information, as well as children's case records.

Overview

Cheshire East local authority children's services were last inspected by Ofsted in July 2015, when the local authority was judged as requiring improvement to be good, with the adoption service judged to be good.

Since the last inspection, senior leaders have ensured that children increasingly benefit from a strengthened focus on permanence planning at both strategic and operational levels. The local authority has continuously developed and improved children's journeys into permanent homes.

The improvements to permanence planning for children have been supported by an effective Department for Education-funded 'Partners in Practice' collaboration. This demonstrates the senior leaders' understanding of the issues in practice and their commitment to prioritising permanence for the children in their care. The local authority is also working well with neighbouring local authorities to ensure that joint targeted recruitment of foster carers reflects the identified need for more placements for older children who have increased vulnerabilities and complex needs.

Social workers and managers are appropriately reducing the numbers of children on care orders placed at home with parents. Their success in achieving this is, in part, helped by the courts' increasing confidence in social workers' practice and assessment with children and their families, and in effective working practices between partner agencies.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- Update assessments and plans that respond to changes in children's circumstances.
- Care plans that are fully accessible to children and parents.
- Return home interviews for children who go missing, and dissemination of learning from these to inform care and placement plans.
- Clear and consistent recording of supervision and management oversight on children's case records.

Findings

- Social workers know the children in care very well and ensure that they meet with the children regularly. Purposeful and creative direct work is being undertaken to ensure that the child's experiences, views and feelings are well understood. Social workers use this knowledge well to inform care plans. Although a minority are high, caseloads are reported as being manageable by social workers. Effective peer and management support and the increasing use of the local authority's chosen social work model and group supervision are resulting in improved planning for permanence that is enhanced by strong social work support.
- While well-detailed and analysed case summaries enable workers to rapidly gain an understanding of prevailing and past concerns, the recording of informal and formal supervision does not provide a good record of the rationale for decision-making.

- Children benefit from timely plans for permanence. In the majority of cases, decision-making has been helped by the introduction of permanence trackers and performance forums, which have enabled managers to have strong oversight of both permanence decisions and the progression of care plans. A new role, the family network coordinator, assists with identifying potential carers within children's families. Social workers and managers have embraced the concept of 'permanency Fridays' to prioritise children who need a well-considered plan for permanence.
- The majority of assessments undertaken by child in need and child protection teams evaluate a child's needs well through careful analysis of risk, protective factors and the child's wishes and feelings, as well as the impact of the family history. Several pre-birth, sibling and parenting assessments demonstrate high-quality analysis and evaluation that have enabled timely decisions to be made with regard to proceedings and changes of placement. These assessments are not always routinely updated when children's needs change. The use of an 'update-assessment' in children's care plans means that children's full history is not always adequately reflected. When children's placements are disrupted, the local authority is not making best use of potential learning from disruption meetings to inform assessments.
- Children are not always helped to feel part of the care-planning process as care plans are often too long and contain placement plans and updated assessments. This is not conducive to helping children to fully understand the plans for their future. While the use of care-planning meetings is effective in monitoring progress of the care plan, they are not consistently held for all children, and are not subject to management oversight. This means that not all children receive the same level of planning input.
- Delay is being effectively minimised for children, both before and during proceedings, through the use of strong tracking arrangements. This is an area that has been strengthened since the last inspection. Targeted work has improved the quality of pre-proceedings letters and they now include clearer contracts of expectations. The local authority's chosen model for analysing strengths and risks is being embedded into this area of work; it is intended that this will increase the use of helpful language for children and parents. Escalation to pre-proceedings was appropriate for the children whose case records were seen during this visit.
- For the majority of children, their independent reviewing officer's (IROs) footprint is clear and assertive within the case records. IROs cultivate a relationship with children in between, and during, reviews which helps them to capture children's ambitions and aspirations.

- There were 20 older children placed in residential provision at the time of this visit. For some of these children, their residential provision is meeting their needs well and additional therapeutic input is improving their lives and future potential. But for others, skilled, experienced and trained foster carers who may best meet the children's needs for a family home are proving to be elusive. In collaboration with sub-regional local authorities, a shared fostering marketing and recruitment hub has been established to recruit carers to fill this gap and provide a sufficient range of care options for children.
- Social workers are identifying, at an earlier stage than at the time of the last inspection, extended family members who could provide care to children. This has resulted in an increasing number of children no longer being children looked after because special guardianship orders have been granted.
- The number of children on care orders who are placed at home with parents is being reduced effectively. The local authority acknowledges that there are still a number of children who could safely have their care orders discharged and have an appropriate plan in place to expedite this. The majority of children who are in or return to the care of their parents are risk assessed appropriately in line with regulations for placement with parents.
- When older children state their wish to return home, social workers and IROs discuss the extent to which parents can safely meet their children's needs. They agree relevant support plans to avoid unnecessary disruption in children's lives, particularly with regard to their education.
- Strong and improving relationships between Cafcass and the courts mean that care proceedings are usually completed within 27 weeks. Cafcass and the local judge report that, despite a rise in care applications, the local authority has improved the quality of reports and maintained timeliness of care proceedings. A collective multi-agency commitment to the progression of children's plans means that delay is further minimised.
- Children's short-term placement stability is improving, assisted by increased capacity of supervising social workers in the fostering team. '@ct', the local authority's specialist team to support fragile placements, also provides support to help foster carers develop resilience and manage children's challenging behaviours. Children in longer term placements experience less stability. The local authority does not effectively use learning from disruption meetings. When children's placements change, the head of the virtual school has proactively secured funding and appropriate education placements for children. This ensures that children, including those in placements out of the local area, have continuity of provision.
- The return home interview process is inconsistent, which means that there are missed opportunities to capture children's reasons for going missing, and findings cannot inform strategic or operational planning.

- Improvements to permanency planning for children are effectively quality assured through the local authority's case audit activity. Most audits highlight relevant issues in relation to social work practice and involve social workers, managers, and, at times, children and parents. This ensures that the audit process is better understood and seen by social workers as an empowering tool to maintain or improve practice. Actions identified through audits do not routinely have timescales applied and this compromises their follow-through.
- The local authority's accurate and up-to-date self-assessment demonstrates that they know their areas of strength and areas for development well. Specifically, it includes evidence indicating improved permanence planning that concurs with many of the findings from this visit. The local authority is clearly focused on improving children's journeys into permanent homes, with strengthened strategic and operational oversight in place that is effectively minimising drift and delay.

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

Yours sincerely

Stella Elliott
Her Majesty's Inspector