

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231
Textphone 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/ofsted



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Colin Foster
Director of Children's Services
Bedford Borough Council
Cauldwell Street
Bedford
MK42 9AP

Dear Mr Foster

Focused visit to Bedford Borough council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Bedford Borough Council children's services on 23 and 24 October 2019. The inspectors were Nigel Parkes, HMI and Brenda McInerney, HMI.

The focus of this visit was on planning and achieving permanence for children, whether by way of adoption, living with family or friends under the terms of a special guardianship order, long-term fostering or residential care, or children returning to live with their birth families.

Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including children's case records. They talked to staff and managers, parents, carers and children, as well as representatives of the judiciary and Cafcass. Inspectors also evaluated the local authority's performance management and quality assurance information.

Overview

The local authority clearly understands the significance and importance of permanence and what it means for children. A strong sense of corporate responsibility and a well-developed approach to permanence planning at every stage of the child's journey are having a positive impact on the experiences and progress of children in care. Permanence planning for unborn babies, particularly those whose parents have previously had children removed from their care, has been significantly strengthened. Adoption performance remains strong. Long-term placement stability has improved.

Senior leaders are visible, active and engaged with frontline practice in a way that is helping to develop an environment in which social work can flourish as well as a

working culture that leaves staff feeling well supported and appropriately challenged. The stability of the workforce has increased significantly, making it possible for children and families to develop more meaningful relationships with their social workers. While there are clearly some areas for further development, senior leaders know what they are and have plans to address them.

Findings

- The local authority's approach to permanence is not starry-eyed or emotionally driven. It is hard-headed, realistic, based on clear values and principles, informed by research and always subject to an appropriate degree of management scrutiny and critical challenge.
- Established following the last inspection, the permanency tracking panel has had a significant impact on the way that social workers think about, and plan their work with, children and families. The quality of assessments, including viability, parenting capacity and SGO assessments, is generally of a high standard. When children in care return home to their birth families, they do so in a planned way, with effective support informed by detailed assessments of placements of children with parents .
- The adoption team continues to go from strength to strength, as evidenced by the number, age and characteristics of children who have been and are being adopted, the level of post-adoption support provided and the absence of any placement breakdowns in the last four years. Perhaps not surprisingly, the local authority has been very successful in encouraging a steady supply of individuals and couples who are willing to put themselves forward as prospective adopters.
- But in Bedford, when it comes to planning and achieving permanence, one size certainly does not fit all. On the contrary, managers and staff consider all the options. They are creative, energetic and persistent in trying to find the right solution for each individual and/or group of brothers and sisters, in whatever form or combination that might take, subject of course to rigorous together or apart assessments. Parallel planning is becoming increasingly the norm, including, for example, in the case of older children living in residential care.
- Permanence planning for unborn babies, particularly where children have previously been removed from their parents' care, has been significantly strengthened. The level of support for families or friends who care for children under the terms of a special guardianship order is impressive. Children are only matched with long-term foster carers, be that with in-house foster carers or those employed by an independent fostering agency, once comprehensive matching reports have been subjected to rigorous scrutiny by the fostering panel and the agency decision maker. Managers and staff in the children with disabilities team act as passionate advocates for disabled children, insisting that they have the same need for, and right to, permanence as any other child.

- Senior leaders are making good use of performance management information, including a range of well-developed tracking tools, to monitor progress and resolve difficulties that get in the way of children being able to achieve permanence in a timely way. For example, complex case discussion and placement stability meetings are helping to prevent avoidable placement breakdowns. However, the way in which these meetings are recorded could be improved. Decisions taken and actions agreed are not always sufficiently sharp.
- The local authority takes the physical and mental health, and emotional well-being, of children in care very seriously. This is evident in the timely completion of initial health assessments (IHAs), annual health assessments, dental checks and, in the case of younger children, immunisations. Children in care also benefit from a bespoke child and adolescent mental health service, which provides a timely and effective response to children and young people who are struggling to come to terms with past trauma and/or overcome low self-esteem, both of which have the potential to undermine placement stability.
- The quality of life-story work with children living with special guardians or in long-term foster placements, as well as those whose permanence plan involves adoption, is of a very high standard. Contact between children in care and significant others in their lives is carefully considered, actively promoted and well managed. This includes children living in adoptive placements, which are always assumed to be 'open' unless, for whatever reason, that is not in the child's best interests. Children's achievements are joyously celebrated.
- The virtual school has a clear sense of purpose and direction and makes good use of performance data to target its activity to best effect. As a result, its influence and impact continue to grow. Ninety-six per cent of children in care have an up-to-date personal education plan (PEP). Better use is being made of the pupil premium grant. The focus now is on improving school attendance, reducing school exclusions and making better use of strengths and difficulties questionnaires.
- Child care plans are generally clear about the long-term direction of travel and provide lots of relevant background information, but, in the absence of specific and measurable outcome-focused action plans, they read more like detailed case summaries. Senior leaders recognise that this has the potential to undermine accountability and means that child care plans are not very child-friendly. They plan to address this when the new electronic case recording system is rolled out in November.
- Social workers keep in touch with, and see, children in care on a very regular basis, including those children who are living out of area. Children are actively encouraged to be heard and not just seen. Most contribute, one way or another, to their child care reviews, which are almost always held on time. Independent reviewing officers (IROs), who know their children well, write review minutes in the second person and directly to the child. However, some IROs are doing this

better than others, and IROs are not always effective in driving permanence. For a very small number of children, this has led to delays, for example in applying for care orders to be discharged once children have returned home as part of a reunification plan.

- The local authority, which is looking to recruit more long-term foster carers, has managed to achieve a net gain in the number of in-house foster carers. Steps are also being taken to increase the number of care leavers achieving permanence through staying put arrangements.
- Senior leaders are making good progress in their ambition to recruit and retain 'awesome' staff. The local authority's investment in the professional development of its workforce, particularly in systemic practice, is starting to pay dividends, as is evidenced by increasingly strong, relationship-based practice with children, birth families and carers. This is particularly apparent in the children with disabilities team, where the local authority's preferred model of social work is fully embedded.
- Collaborative learning discussions, Bedford's equivalent of case management audits, and the quality of reflection they bring to bear on the progress and experience of individual children, are contributing to a steady but sure rise in practice standards.
- Staff turnover and the local authority's reliance on agency staff have reduced significantly in the last 12 months. Increased staffing stability makes it easier for children and families to develop meaningful relationships with their social workers. Cafcass and the judiciary both spoke positively about recent improvements in pre-birth planning and about the impact on children of having a more stable group of managers and staff who are bringing the right cases to court at the right time.

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

Yours sincerely

Nigel Parkes
Her Majesty's Inspector