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5 March 2020

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Dear Ms Ogle-Welbourn

Focused visit to Cambridgeshire County Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Cambridgeshire County Council children's services on 11 and 12 February 2020. The inspectors were Margaret Burke HMI and Nigel Parkes HMI.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in care.

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

Overview

Senior leaders have focused on addressing the actions highlighted for improvement in the last inspection. They fully understand both service strengths and areas for development and they have worked systematically, together with their partners, to drive up the quality of social work practice. The local authority is able to demonstrate improvements in services for children in care which have positively impacted on their experiences and progress.

Astute investments in evidence-based initiatives that are designed to improve services for families and strengthen social workers' impact are helping the local authority to safely reduce the numbers of children who need care. Successful recruitment campaigns have begun to ease the very high caseloads found in some teams at the time of the last inspection. This is providing many social workers with more time to conduct direct work to support children in care and promote greater stability in their lives. Quality assurance and performance management systems are

well developed. They are used effectively to steer and support improvements in social work practice with children and their families.

While senior leaders have taken action to make improvements, they also recognise that some changes in response to the key areas highlighted at the last inspection are not yet fully embedded. Leaders understand that more still needs to be done to secure a stable workforce and achieve consistently good-quality services that support all children in their care to be safe, happy and reach their full potential.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The quality of written plans, chronologies, records of visits and supervision notes.
- The impact of management oversight, to ensure that supervision for social workers is more purposeful and reflective and that it consistently promotes high expectations, challenges lapses in progress and drives plans forward for children.
- The impact of children's involvement and participation, so that children are told what is being done in response to their views and wishes, both for their own individual case plans and when contributing to strategic service planning.
- Arrangements to assess children's health needs and support their mental health.

Findings

- Decisions that children should come into care are appropriate. For new entrants to care, work now continues at pace to ensure that plans progress for children to either return home or to secure permanence through care. Directions to escalate matters into the court arena are evidence-based. However, for a small number of children, where older siblings have previously been removed, more proactive pre-birth planning within the public law outline, and greater availability of foster to adopt placements, would have helped to avoid early placement moves for these children.
- Where it is possible for children in care to return to the care of family members, this is supported well. Intensive work undertaken with children ensures they safely transition back into their family's lives; this also includes children who have been in care for several years. This work is skilfully coordinated and supported by the reunification and placement stability team (RAPS), which work alongside social workers, children, their families and networks to manage and support successful reunification.
- Most children in care have social workers who regularly visit and build meaningful relationships with them. Children's workers often go the extra mile to ensure children are well supported and have their cultural, disability and health needs met. Additional oversight and scrutiny are provided by independent reviewing

officers, who keep track of what is happening in children's lives. The virtual school has strengthened its role in ensuring that children are given appropriate support with their education needs. Workers and carers are increasingly focusing on life-story work, helping children to understand their family histories and make sense of why they are in care. However, more attention is required to ensure that life-story work is not just a one-off book, or a series of photographs, and that chronologies and genograms are regularly completed, updated, are easy for children to understand and are regularly discussed with them.

- Continued investment and successes in recruitment campaigns have increased capacity and reduced average social work caseloads. This is promoting stability in many teams, although further improvement is needed. Caseloads remain too high, particularly in the unaccompanied care and some children in care social work teams, and for some individual workers elsewhere. Staff turnover and sickness in these teams have resulted in some children having to endure frequent changes of social worker. This makes it difficult for children to have meaningful relationships with them.
- Most children live in good-quality placements with carers who meet their needs and make a positive difference to their lives. This is evidenced in the progress children make in their education, and their participation in a range of social and leisure activities, resulting in increased confidence and self-esteem.
- Still too many of Cambridgeshire's children in care live in placements which are outside the county and a long way from their families and friends. While recent foster carer recruitment has successfully increased numbers of carers, it has had limited impact on reducing the scale of this issue. An important factor here is that the local authority still does not have enough foster carers or placements in Cambridgeshire with the right skills, knowledge and experience or the cultural match to meet children's presenting needs. Efforts are made to manage and minimise the impact of out-of-area placements, with additional support to maintain school placements and investment in meaningful family time. However, challenges remain in accessing timely health assessments for children, and social workers face additional pressures from spending much of their time travelling around the country to visit children in their placements.
- The local authority recognises the importance for children of understanding whether they can remain with their carers throughout their childhood and beyond. Leaders have strengthened systems and processes to monitor and track arrangements to secure permanence. The work of the relatively new permanence workers now provides children and their carers with the best possible chance of successfully achieving permanence. The number of children being helped to achieve permanence with matched foster carers and families is steadily rising. However, for some children, a lack of urgency in translating plans into practice means that they are left waiting too long for these arrangements to be confirmed.

- Senior leaders recognise that mental health and emotional well-being services are fragmented. Waiting times need to be reduced and pathways clarified in order to make sure that it is easier for children in care and care leavers to get the right help and support when they need it. Leaders recognise that some children and their carers are being let down. They are restructuring the corporate parenting service's clinical team, with the aim of addressing these issues.
- While there have been some recent improvements, children are still not getting timely initial health assessments when they come into care in order to ensure that any existing health needs are met. Local authority leaders are discussing this with health strategic leads, but substantial progress is yet to be made.
- Every Cambridgeshire child who goes missing from care is offered a return home interview. Risk assessment tools are completed to a high standard with children. They help to identify and explore actual and potential risks and lead to the development of detailed, robust and effective safety management plans. This is an area of strength for the authority. The local authority recognises that more work is required to evidence impact and effectiveness. They have secured additional funding to further develop work to disrupt perpetrators and also to protect and support children who are affected by criminal exploitation.
- The quality of case recording is too variable. Some records help to provide a wonderfully rich picture of the child, their lived experiences and their wishes and feelings. Others are repetitive summaries that seem to have been 'copied and pasted', and they provide little sense of the child's current situation. This is particularly evident in the recording of visits to children and of supervision discussions, both time-consuming recording processes which add very little value. While supervision is now taking place more regularly, frontline managers are still not consistently providing the purposeful discussion and critical challenge needed to promote high expectations and drive children's plans forward.
- Social workers in the children in care and disability teams are not updating assessments at regular intervals or when the child's circumstances change. Therefore, many do not reflect current issues for children or their families. Care plans are predominately focused on rudimentary process issues, rather than on those things that are important to children and that are gathered through consultation exercises and conversations with them.
- The recently introduced electronic recording system has strengthened leaders' and managers' oversight of frontline practice and performance. It also provides social workers and managers with better tools to sharpen recording practices and avoid unnecessary duplication of work.
- The established corporate parenting arrangements are effective in engaging councillors and officer attendance. These meetings promote stimulating discussions. They challenge and hold officers to account, providing direction to inform improvements. However, despite best efforts, the engagement of children

in care and care leavers is limited. More is needed to ensure that these meetings enable children in care and care leavers to be fully involved in steering and influencing the agenda and outcomes.

- Continued investment in participation services ensures that efforts are made at many levels to engage children and solicit their views. While children's views are captured, it is not always clearly reported back to them or to others what has been done because of their views.

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

Yours sincerely

Margaret Burke
Her Majesty's Inspector