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Lucy Butler  
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County Hall  
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Dear Ms Butler

### **Monitoring visit of West Sussex children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to West Sussex children's services on 18 May 2021. The visit was the second monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in May 2019. Her Majesty's Inspectors were Tracey Scott and Maire Atherton.

The local authority is making steady progress in improving services for its children and young people.

### **Areas covered by the visit**

During this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made for children in the following areas:

- The quality, effectiveness and impact of social work practice for children in the assessment, planning and progression of their permanence plans
- The quality, timeliness and effectiveness of life-story work with children
- The quality, timeliness and impact of supervision, management oversight and decision-making.

The methodology for this visit was in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. However, the delivery model was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 (coronavirus) context. The visit was carried out remotely, using video calls for discussions with social workers, managers, leaders and partners. The lead inspector and the director of children's services agreed arrangements to deliver this visit effectively while working within national and local guidelines for responding to COVID-19 and meeting the needs of the local authority's workforce.

## **Overview**

The local authority is making steady progress in this area of practice. Senior leaders have a realistic self-evaluation and clear understanding of how to improve. They have a good understanding of the weaknesses in the service and have a clear and coherent plan to focus on the necessary improvements. A permanent senior leadership team is helping to build stability and consistency across the service. Senior leaders are ambitious and determined to improve services for children in West Sussex but recognise there is a lot still to do. The local authority's approach to quality assurance has been strengthened, and there are some very early signs this is improving the consistency and quality of the support being provided to children. Stronger systems, processes and senior management oversight of children seeking permanence have improved outcomes and the timeliness of achieving permanence for some children. However, these are not yet having a consistent impact on the experience for all children needing permanence.

There remains too much inconsistency in the quality and impact of assessments, plans, management oversight and supervision, which hinders the timely progression of children's plans. A lack of clarity and understanding about practice and procedures in frontline teams and delays in the progression of specific family- and friends-related assessments and care proceedings have led to some children living with friends and family carers in unregulated or unlawful placements for extended periods of time.

## **Findings and evaluation of progress**

Since the focused visit in October 2020, the local authority has maintained a clear and determined approach to improvement, despite the additional challenges presented by the pandemic. A permanent, experienced and ambitious senior leadership team is in place. They have a clear and coherent plan and are realistic about the challenges ahead.

Most children are living in placements that meet their needs and are doing well.

Most children are seen regularly by their social workers, but the quality and impact of visits to children is variable. For some visits, there is evidence of social workers engaging purposefully with children and seeking to understand their experiences and hear their wishes and feelings. For others, the visit lacks purpose and the child is less visible.

Some children have too many changes of social worker. This has an adverse impact on the progression of their plans for achieving permanence and in helping these children to understand their history and the decisions made for them.

Some children live in circumstances of chronic neglect for too long before authoritative decisions are taken and actioned to meet their needs and future arrangements for care. The local authority has made progress in strengthening

systems, processes and senior management oversight of children seeking permanence, and this is gaining traction, but it is not consistently having the necessary impact on improving experiences for all children.

When it is recognised that it is no longer possible for children to live safely with their birth parents, social workers seek to make alternative arrangements where possible with family and friends. A lack of clarity and understanding in frontline teams of the relevant guidance and regulations, along with delays in subsequent assessments and the progression of care proceedings, has led to some children living in homes with family and friends carers that fall below the expected standard for fostering regulations. The local authority is aware of this and has taken steps to assure themselves of the safety and suitability of these arrangements for children, providing additional support where needed. These arrangements are meeting children's short-term needs and for some their circumstances have improved. Actions taken by leaders mean that the number of children in these situations is decreasing, but the pace of moving some children out of these situations has been slow. Recent practice shows improvement in this area.

The majority of children living in long-term fostering arrangements have benefited from having these arrangements reviewed and secured as permanent placements. This provides children with a greater sense of security, stability and belonging.

Fostering panels are effective and rigorous in their oversight of these arrangements. A post-panel debrief provides helpful reflection and learning in identifying weaknesses, to support practice improvement. Agency decision-maker and permanence panel decision-making is well considered and provides a clear rationale for decisions.

Life-story work has been an area of improvement and focus but is yet to be progressed for all children not living with their birth parents. Some children remain unclear about the reasons they no longer live with their parents and the future plans for their care. Consequently, some children do not fully understand their history, culture and identity. Children adopted since 2018 now have life-story books and later life letters to help them understand their history and identity. Inspectors saw some good examples of colourful, accessible life-story books and creative direct work with children to help them understand their histories and the decisions made for them.

The majority of children now have a permanence plan at their second review. A stronger approach to pre-birth planning and the early consideration of permanence has prompted more timely decisions and actions for some children. This includes a growing number of children moving into foster-for-adoption placements from hospital. This helps promote early attachment of young children to their carers.

The timescales for children to achieve permanence through adoption are not yet improving. However, links between the local authority and the regional adoption agency are increasingly strong. Rigorous monitoring of children's journeys to permanence with challenge and support is becoming embedded in the service.

Variability in the quality and timeliness of social work practice and frontline management impedes plans to achieve permanence for some children. These children do not benefit from timely, comprehensive assessments to consider their relationships with their brothers and sisters and whether their needs can best be met living separately or, with support, living together.

Social work assessments for children's reviews are strong and capture the child's experience, an update and analysis of their current situation and appropriate actions to meet their needs.

Social work assessments for reviews and records of reviews are written in the first person to the child. Stronger examples are balanced, jargon free and warmly written, capturing a genuine relationship with the child. These were invaluable in helping children to understand their history and in supporting life-story work to help children understand their identity and decisions that were made for them. However, this is not consistently in place for all children.

The independent reviewing officer's footprint is increasingly apparent on children's records. The subsequent impact on progressing children's plans is variable.

Time spent with people who are important to children is usually carefully considered and appropriate.

Most supervision is regular, and inspectors saw some strong examples of child-focused, thoughtful, analytical supervision with clear actions to progress children's plans. Weaker records lacked analysis and a focus on the child's experience; subsequent actions were compliance and process driven.

All managers have been through a comprehensive management assessment programme. This has provided a clear analysis of the strengths and areas for individual and organisational development. The assessments will be used to inform tailored management development plans, with the aim of strengthening the impact of managers on service delivery.

Compliance with audit completion has increased significantly. The local authority has recently strengthened its quality assurance arrangements, including a rigorous approach to moderation, senior oversight of and the timely re-audit of children's records considered to be inadequate. Inspectors saw some recent improvement in the quality of audit and there is a growing shared understanding of what good practice looks like. This has not yet had the required impact for all children in ensuring that their plans are progressed effectively. The local authority recognises this and has identified it is an area for ongoing attention.

Caseloads in some parts of the service remain too high and this has an adverse impact on the timeliness of some children achieving permanence. Investment in the social worker offer has been agreed and is due for implementation. Practitioners spoken to during this visit described their workload as manageable but at capacity.

Staff recognise improvements made in this part of the service and the ongoing drive to improve further, although some also commented that they find the extent and pace of change at times difficult to keep up with.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. It will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Tracey Scott  
Her Majesty's Inspector