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Ms Bernie Brown Director of Children's Services
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Dear Bernie

Focused visit to Bolton children's services

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic.

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Bolton children's services on 29 and 30 June 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Mandy Nightingale and Kathryn Grindrod.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for planning and achieving permanence.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. However, the delivery model was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 context. 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. This visit was carried out on site.

Headline findings

Since the previous inspection in 2018, when services were judged to be good, political and senior leaders have maintained a specific focus on securing permanence for children in care in Bolton. Children are at the forefront of both strategic planning and frontline practice. In September 2020, the council made the decision to separate children's services from other directorates to strengthen the strategic focus on improving services for children in Bolton. Since that time, there has been a planned reduction in the number of children in care and an increase in the number of

children returning to their parents' care that has led to more children now living in stable long-term placements that meet their needs.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The quality of the casework supervision record between team managers and social workers.
- The recording of contingency planning within children's care plans.
- The recognition and support for children's diverse needs.

Main findings

Bolton is one of a small number of local authorities in the north-west of England that have been categorised as high risk throughout the pandemic and subject to the tightest lockdown restrictions. Apart from a brief period at the start of the pandemic, most vulnerable children in Bolton have continued to receive a face-to-face service from their social workers. When this has not been possible, a tracker has supported social workers to plan for and maintain regular contact with children and their families. Social workers have been assisted to work flexibly from home or the office and provided with relevant personal protective equipment so that they can continue to visit children. Leaders and managers adapted to new working conditions quickly and have maintained regular informative communication with the workforce and continued to improve practice through a variety of online and face-to-face learning. Social workers report feeling supported and safe working in Bolton.

When it is no longer safe for children to live with their birth parents and they come into the care of the local authority, their need for permanence is seen as a priority by those working with them. The local authority's primary aim is for children to remain with their family whenever it is safe to do so, and this is reflected in frontline practice. The range of legal options available to the local authority to meet children's need for permanence are well considered.

Children's needs are mostly considered well, through robust and comprehensive assessments which consider both their needs and their carers' ability to meet these now and into the future. For a small number of children, their needs arising from diversity are not fully recognised, understood or responded to.

Comprehensive together and apart assessments for brothers and sisters sensitively consider children's needs. When it is not possible for them to live together, social workers provide effective direct work to help them understand why.

Purposeful direct work with children, their families and carers informs permanence planning. Children are helped to understand what their plan means for them. A wide range of staff within the local authority, schools and the wider community work directly with children to gather their wishes and feelings effectively. For some children, it is clear that their views are acted on and are directing the planning for

permanence. Children are provided with information about their life history through carefully prepared life-story work.

Children's plans clearly set out the aim for permanence. They consider the child's needs for their home, education and family time, and most have clear actions and timescales to meet the child's needs. For a small number of children, their plans are too complex, and this makes it difficult for families and professionals to identify which actions should be prioritised to support timely permanence. When children's circumstances change, regular multi-agency meetings chaired by independent reviewing officers are held to ensure that their plan remains relevant to their needs. However, contingency planning for some children is not always present or clear enough to explain what needs to happen if the plan is not progressing or the child's needs change.

The local authority uses a wide range of interventions, including family group conferencing, financial or housing support and intensive family work, in accordance with the child's changing needs. This flexibility supports the plan for permanence, whether this is for a return to the birth family, discharge of the care order or permanence through alternative care.

When a child's placement starts to break down, the local authority actively starts a new assessment to identify alternative carers, including previously assessed family members. Inspectors saw creative and thoughtful planning for children. For example, some assessments revisited specialist assessments completed during the legal proceedings to inform their revised plans. For some children, this means they can live with their birth family.

For children who have entered care recently, and where it is assessed to be in their best interests to remain living with long-term foster parents or in residential children's homes, the local authority takes swift action to ensure that these placements are formally recognised as long-term arrangements. However, a small number of children who have been with their foster carers for a long period of time continue to experience delay in having their placements matched to their long-term carers. These children are not being provided with a sense of stability, security and belonging.

The local authority has increased the number of children who appropriately secure permanence through special guardianship orders (SGO). This success can be attributed to the council's commitment to individualising SGO support plans and going above and beyond what is required of them. A newly developed special guardianship coordinator role provides effective support to prepare special guardians and carers. The local authority has developed strong relationships with partner agencies in order to support children and their carers both now and in the future, and this is reducing the risk of a placement breakdown. When it is assessed as being required, children and their carers continue to receive support after the SGO order is granted.

Leaders maintain oversight of the progress in matching children with long-term placements through regular permanence panels. Comprehensive trackers also help leaders to monitor the potential to discharge care orders for children. Good-quality applications to court successfully result in the discharge of care orders. This means that, for most children, their circumstances are regularly reviewed and they are provided with the right intervention in their lives to achieve timely permanence.

Most written supervision records are brief, with very limited evidence of reflection on children's experiences. Actions do not always have timescales, or they are unrealistic. When some children experience drift in securing permanence, managers do not challenge this through supervision. However, social workers do receive regular supervision and they told inspectors that this is effective in supporting them to reflect on their practice.

Independent reviewing officers meet, or speak with, children prior to their child in care review meetings to seek their views to influence the planning for their care. Within the last six months, the recording of children's review meetings has improved. They are now written to the child in a language they can understand. Independent reviewing officers have recently started to record their views about the progress of the child's plan. However, this is too recent for inspectors to comment on the effectiveness of this practice to improve timely permanence for children.

Leaders have maintained a learning culture for the workforce throughout the pandemic with regular and relevant online training. Practice weeks, findings from audits and children's complaints are incorporated into a continual learning programme for social workers. Social workers told inspectors that they value the learning from training, and it informs and improves their practice. Social workers talked passionately about 'their children'. They have established strong relationships with children and know them well. Social workers enjoy working in Bolton.

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

Yours sincerely

Mandy Nightingale
Her Majesty's Inspector