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Dear Ms Teasdale

Focused visit to Cornwall children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Cornwall children's services on 18 to 19 January 2022. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Sarah Canto and Andy Whippey.

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.

Headline findings

Despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the local authority has done well in maintaining the high standard of work in identifying permanent homes for children which was seen at Ofsted's last inspection in 2019. This visit found that, while opportunities remain to further strengthen the quality and consistency of practice, the local authority has made some important improvements in the services it provides to children and in the outcomes they achieve. These improvements are driven by senior leaders who are committed to providing security and stability for children and who provide strong and visible leadership to staff. Managers and staff in Cornwall have worked hard to enhance planning and permanence arrangements and children's need for permanence is now well considered and acted upon. A children's rights approach has been formally adopted by the local authority and, within this, corporate and political leaders are working alongside the director of children's services and her senior leadership team to create a framework that is progressively embedding children's rights at the centre of planning for children. Having relaunched Cornwall's permanence strategy, leaders have ensured that nearly all children have a permanence plan so that arrangements can be made to help them feel as secure as possible. Alongside this strategy are a wide range of creative, flexible and specialist services that provide effective support for children, families and carers. Social work practice is strong; social workers work tirelessly to promote children's welfare.

Independent reviewing officers discharge their functions from a children's rights and advocacy perspective. They write clear and sensitive letters to children explaining what decisions have been made and why.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice?

- The frequency of case supervision for social workers and the rigour with which agreed actions and timescales are set and followed up by managers.
- The specificity of plans agreed at children's review meetings and in particular the use of timescales to help monitor the completion of agreed actions.
- The inclusion of children's views in audits of social work practice.

Main findings

Senior leaders have a strong and ongoing focus on driving improvement in permanence planning for children. The regular sharing and discussion of performance data, quality information and analysis helps social workers to understand the impact of their work. Good-quality permanence and life-story training and redesigned electronic workflow processes, that better support social workers, are examples of some of the developments that are leading to permanence for children being increasingly central to social workers' practice.

The local authority provides a wide range of support and intervention to give children the maximum opportunity to remain with their families or to return home from care. Many children live in pockets of significant deprivation in Cornwall, but team managers have appropriate financial autonomy to enable social workers to resolve practical problems quickly so that they can focus on more complex and underlying need to improve children's lives.

The need to secure early permanence for children is clearly understood. Parallel planning through the constructive use of family group conferences is implemented at an early stage. Assessments of birth and extended family members are undertaken in a timely way. Fostering to adopt arrangements are considered when this is in children's best interests, despite the low number of such carers. The local authority is currently working with a regional adoption agency to explore the potential benefits for Cornwall's children if they join this agency.

Planning for children for whom an adoption decision has been made, but where potential adopters have not yet been identified, is both timely and child-centred. Early referrals are made to the adoption service to identify adopters as soon as possible. Plans for children to continue having contact with people that are important to them are both well considered and effective. When children move in with their adopters, and before an adoption order is made, they, and their carers, benefit from focused adoption support plans. Timely applications are made to court so that

children's permanence is secured and ongoing carefully thought-out post-adoption support is provided when appropriate.

Careful planning enables children to be matched to prospective adopters who are well placed to meet their needs. Decisions to change the child's plan are only made after very careful reassessment. For example, some children have been enabled to remain with their long-term foster carers with whom they have already formed secure attachments, and to grow up with their brothers or sisters.

Careful consideration is given to all forms of permanence that may meet children's needs when they cannot remain with their parents. There is a strong emphasis on supporting children to be brought up in their extended families when this is in their best interests. This planning does well at enabling children to help maintain connections with people important to them, as well as sustaining community and education links. Conversations are had at an early stage with connected carers, and children's views are sought, when there is the potential for a special guardianship arrangement to be the best way to secure a permanent home for a child. The notable increase of such arrangements is a measure of the success of this proactive approach.

Special guardians are valued highly. To this end, a skilled multidisciplinary team provides support and challenge to social workers to ensure that plans made for these children after a special guardianship order has been made are beneficial and realistic. Keeping in touch plans and tailored support offers include a wide range of options, such as specialist therapies, joint working with education partners, support groups and more. The manager of this team provides effective oversight of the support offered to children and their special guardians.

Children who come into care on a voluntary basis do so appropriately and their need for permanence is carefully considered. Legal proceedings are initiated when it is necessary to do so to ensure that children's plans for permanence are progressed.

Long-term foster carers have attachment mentors and specialist training in trauma and recovery which helps them provide a high standard of care for children who have complex needs. A significant minority of those children living in long-term foster placements are not yet formally matched with their permanent carers. Although this may not make a practical difference to children's living arrangements, it means that they have not had the chance to benefit from a formal celebration of their matching or have the added reassurance and sense of belonging that this confirmation can bring to children's emotional well-being. Senior managers have recently developed a tracking system which allows increased oversight and monitoring of these children. A timely action plan is now in place to ratify these matches, consistent with children's wishes and needs, or to ensure that alternative solutions are sought to achieve security for these children.

When children's needs are best met by residential care, their need for permanence is recognised and acted upon. Assessments are regularly reviewed to determine if children's needs have changed so that plans can be implemented that are reflective of their needs.

Permanence plans for disabled children are thorough and child-centred. Social workers work closely with their colleagues in adult services as children develop into adulthood, so that their long-term future is secured. Planning for disabled children has a strong focus on identifying needs and risks which are addressed when identifying permanent homes.

Children and their foster carers receive strong bespoke support, including during evenings and weekends, provided by a skilled family placement support team. The team works effectively with children's support networks to ensure that joined-up provision meets both children's and foster carers' needs. This help, based on users' feedback, is highly valued and has a positive impact on promoting placement stability for children.

Children receive significant therapeutic support to promote their emotional well-being and to help them understand how and why decisions about their lives are made. Children actively engage with this child-centred therapy. Many children have told their social workers how much they have enjoyed and benefited from this support. This has helped them to develop and sustain positive relationships with their carers.

Children are visited regularly and at a frequency that matches their individual levels of need. Records of these visits give insight into children's lives and experiences. Social workers know their children well and, in most cases recording, children's wishes and feelings are clear, with analysis and agreed next steps that show that their views have been taken into account.

The quality and timeliness of life-story work was an area for improvement at the previous inspection. Helping children to make sense of their past, at the right time for them, is an area that senior leaders are prioritising. Children have helped to produce information for other children describing how life-story work can benefit them. The local authority has made a commitment to all children in care, and not just to those adopted, to provide high-quality life-story work and later life letters in a timescale consistent with their needs. There is still more work to do to achieve this target for all children and to ensure that the life-story materials produced are always stored in children's electronic case files. However, this work is well under way and is supported by well-trained life-story coordinators.

Children's rights advocates (independent reviewing officers) have oversight of permanence plans and appropriately raise concerns when children's needs are not being met as well or as quickly as they could be. This helps to ensure that corrective action is taken to improve the help that children receive. Children are actively

encouraged to participate in their reviews. Children's rights advocates consistently engage with children to ensure that their views positively inform plans. Reviews are well attended by multi-agency partners and by families. Well-constructed and sensitive letters are written to children to help them to understand the plans made for them. However, the records of some reviews do not document the full range of actions agreed and the timescales within which they should happen. For a few children, this makes it harder to track their progress and to ensure that they have permanent homes that are well matched to their needs as quickly as possible.

Recorded formal casework supervision for social workers is not always frequent enough. Supervision documents demonstrate reflection and analysis, but these discussions do not always translate into clarity of actions designed to improve children's well-being, including timescales for completion of such actions. This is important to give social workers necessary direction to take relevant actions to meet children's needs and to enable managers to review ongoing progress. Inspectors did, however, see management oversight in children's records, including appropriate sign-off of assessments, plans and consultations.

Strong performance and quality management arrangements enable senior leaders to have a clear line of sight to the quality of social work practice and how well this is helping to secure permanence for children. Audits are reflective and focused on impact but do not separate historic practice from more recent practice, which makes it more difficult for managers to provide clear feedback about current strengths and areas for development to social workers. Although the local authority has a plan to change this within the next few months, audits do not currently include feedback from children or their families and this may limit their accuracy and effectiveness as a tool for understanding the quality of practice and helping to drive improvement.

Social workers told inspectors that they feel well supported by their managers and senior leaders and enjoy working in Cornwall. Social workers are capable and committed. They are ambitious for their children's futures and demonstrate a breadth and depth of skill and experience. These are qualities that are reflected in the positive outcomes that are being achieved for children in Cornwall.

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

Yours sincerely

Sarah Canto
Her Majesty's Inspector