

06 May 2022

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Dear Sue

Monitoring visit to Middlesbrough children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Middlesbrough children's services on 29 and 30 March 2022. This was the third monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in January 2020. There has also been a focused assurance visit in July 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Louise Hollick and Nick Stacey.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the following areas of concern identified at the last inspection:

- The quality of matching, placement and decision-making for children in care.
- Planning and achieving permanence for children.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

Headline findings

Under the banner of 'Middlesbrough Children Matter', corporate leaders in Middlesbrough have delivered a sustained programme of improvements to ensure that there is a systemic focus on children. Senior managers know their service well and have an improved management grip and understanding of social work practice. There has been a substantial improvement in permanence planning for children in care since the last inspection. This is having a positive impact on the progress and experiences of these children. A number of children are placed in unregistered and unlawful placements. Risk assessments are in place for these children and there are plans in place to ensure these children are progressed to secure legal arrangements as quickly as possible.

Findings and evaluation of progress

The director of children's services and senior managers know their services well. Through a detailed improvement plan and accurate self-assessment, they are able to precisely track improvements made in the service and the areas that need further development. Senior managers have created a stable and committed leadership team with a substantially improved line of sight through quality assurance and a number of robust reviewing processes and panels.

Well-crafted performance reports provide senior managers with an informed picture of patterns and trends concerning children in care, including the impact of early permanence work. Data suggests that many outcome indicators for children in care are moving in the right direction and long legacy issues are being determinedly tackled. Managers not only know what is going on, but also use performance information to target improvements.

The quality assurance programme is strong and is enabling leaders and managers to have a clear and detailed eye on the quality of practice as well as performance. A comprehensive audit tool is well designed to conduct in-depth and detailed collaborative reviews of children's cases. The focus of audits is balanced between procedural compliance, adherence to practice standards, and overall quality of social work practice. The audit process assists not only individual social workers learning and development but also as a mechanism for continued system improvements by collating themes for team plans. The centre of practice excellence provides a central focus for collating learning and improvement across children's social care.

Leaders have developed a systemic framework for permanence planning that is less reactive and more forward looking. Specialist teams of social workers have been recruited to address a legacy of a large number of children without clear permanency plans. This work is having a positive impact in safely reducing the numbers of children in care.

For children who have come into care more recently, practice is stronger and there is more careful thought for early permanence planning. Children's permanence plans now include parallel planning of different options for children in an attempt to avoid drift and delay and make timely decisions for children. Social workers are aware of the need for children to have permanence and know what steps they need to take to achieve it.

Children are brought into care more expediently, through better quality court applications made at the right time. This has been confirmed by the local judiciary and Cafcass, who gave inspectors positive feedback about the improvements in legal advice that are leading to better informed decision-making for children.

The majority of children cases reviewed by inspectors on this visit showed that children are making good progress in their placements. Children in foster care are in good-quality placements. They are attending school, making educational progress and are supported with their interests and hobbies. Children's emotional and well-being needs are identified, and frequently they are provided with support through thrive programmes in schools.

For a small number of children, there is still some impact from a legacy of absent or poor planning. Some children have experienced earlier unplanned placement moves and consequent disruption and instability. Challenges in the turnover of social workers remain, and these are affecting care planning for some children, leading to drift and delay. Leaders are aware of this and are striving to ensure that children more recently in care have less disruption and change.

Children in care are visited regularly by their social workers. Most know their children well and have built trusting relationships with them. Social workers undertake regular direct work with children, and this is sensitively calibrated to their age and understanding. This ensures that the voice of the child is informing planning.

Children are benefiting from safely assessed family time to the level that meets their needs. Family time with extended family is also well considered. Arrangements for family time are reviewed to meet the needs of the children as their needs evolve and in consideration of their wishes. Brothers and sisters together or apart assessments are completed quickly. If brothers and sisters are unable to live together, there is considered planning to allow them to live near each other when possible and to maintain enduring relationships with each other.

When children have a plan for adoption, sensitively written child permanence reports are completed in a timely way. Social workers understand the importance of life story work for children who are adopted, and this ensures that children will have a clear understanding of their history, parentage and identity as they grow up. Children's records are written directly to the child by social workers who know them, and by managers making important decisions. Children who read their records at a later stage will be able to discern the thought and care that went into their planning around their permanent homes.

Children aged 16 to 17 living in unregulated accommodation benefit from care versus support assessments that consider the views and the individual needs of the young person matched against the level of support available in the accommodation. There is robust management oversight of these children to ensure shared decision-making. This ensures that children are placed in accommodation appropriate to their needs and are supported as they transition towards independence.

Care planning meetings, supervision, children's reviews and legal gateway meetings all serve as effective and well-recorded forums for reflective and creative thinking.

They provide clear oversight of the plans and actions to pursue in the best interests of children. As a result, there is less delay for children in achieving permanence.

Regular and high-quality supervision is an active contributor to early permanence planning. It is detailed, reflective and child focused and assists social workers to think through complex situations in addition to ensuring compliance with statutory tasks.

Caseloads have continued to reduce and are manageable for most social workers. For social workers with higher caseloads, there is proactive management support to ensure that social workers can continue to practice effectively and safely.

There is an improved oversight of children's care planning by independent reviewing officers (IROs). Mid-point reviews between the IRO and the social worker keep plans on track. Children know their IRO and are visited by them before their reviews. This is ensuring that children's views are known and are informing care planning.

There are a small number of children placed with family members who have not been formally assessed and approved as connected foster carers. The majority of these children are progressing to permanent arrangements under special guardianship orders with the same carers. There are also a small minority of children in unregistered children's homes. These children have complex needs and are awaiting a suitably matched regulated placement. The lack of appropriate legal arrangements can leave children at risk as the carers ability to meet their needs is undetermined and unregulated. Leaders are aware of these children and all of them have individual assessments to mitigate identified risks. Monthly permanence monitoring group meetings chaired by a senior manager carefully track and quality assure the children's plans and progression towards alternative permanence outcomes. There is additional scrutiny through legal gateway meetings and children's IROs. This cumulative oversight is ensuring that risks to children are minimised and managed as much as possible. Leaders are aware that they need to reduce the numbers of children subject to these unlawful arrangements, and they have plans in place to do so.

All of the social workers who met inspectors during this visit spoke positively about the determined efforts of the leadership group to make improvements and create the conditions for good social work practice through clear expectations and standards. They value the support from team managers and the training and development on offer. This is creating a supportive working culture and ultimately assists social workers in creating positive improvements for the children and families they work with.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Louise Hollick
Her Majesty's Inspector