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Dear Mr Michael

Focused visit to Southend-on-Sea Borough Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Southend-on-Sea Borough Council children's services on 22 and 23 March 2022. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Tom Anthony and Tracey Scott.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for matching, placements and decision-making for children in care, the experience and progress of disabled children in care and the progress of children living in unregulated or unregistered provision.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. Inspectors were on site for the visit. They looked at a range of evidence, including children's records. They talked to members of the Children in Care Council, a foster carer, practitioners and managers, leaders of the virtual school and representatives of partner agencies.

Headline findings

Senior leaders recognise the need to improve the support and stability that they provide to children in care. Recently appointed senior officers are changing arrangements to oversee the progress of all children in care. By streamlining decision-making processes and establishing permanency tracking meetings, they are taking steps to improve how quickly permanence is achieved for children. Leaders know that they need to accelerate progress. Social workers are positive about the way in which leaders engage them in developing and improving services to children and their families.

The authority continues to face challenges in identifying suitable long-term homes for children to grow up in. In response, leaders have increased staff numbers in the

placement team, enhancing capacity to search for placements for children who need care. As a result, work done to assess prospective placements is more thorough, which improves the quality of matching decisions. Leaders know that progress for some children is hindered because of disruption and changes to where they live or changes of social worker. Some children's social workers do not have a clear enough understanding of the information that they need to provide to enable the authority to find the right care for them.

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

- The quality and impact of management oversight and supervision.
- The priority given to direct work with children.
- Matching and placement stability for children in care.
- The timeliness of achieving permanence for all children in care.
- The quality of recording in capturing children's experiences and the decisions made for them.

Main findings

During COVID-19 restrictions, managers and social workers individually risk-assessed children's circumstances and ensured that those most at risk continued to receive face-to-face visits. For children in more stable and secure placements, visiting was appropriately undertaken virtually. Multi-agency meetings, including statutory reviews, continue to be delivered using virtual technology. For some children, this has improved the participation of professionals who support them, and enabled a more comprehensive multi-agency review of their progress.

Most children in care in Southend-on-Sea are living in homes that adequately meet their needs. However, too many children live a long way from Southend and, for some, this has a significant impact on the support and services provided to them.

Children in care supported by the adolescent intervention and prevent team receive skilfully tailored support and planning that improves their lives and enables them to make progress. Workers maintain high levels of contact with children and know them very well. Frequent visits, phone calls and text messages underpin the development of trusting and meaningful relationships, helping children to develop confidence that their best interests are central to the support being offered. They receive good multi-agency support. Children's plans, including disruption and safety plans, reduce the risks that they face. This team's records provide a vibrant and nuanced picture of each child, with up-to-date information and progress reports. Older children benefit from careful planning for the transition to adulthood, and effective support from personal advisers.

Leaders recognise that some social workers do not have sufficient experience to make the best plans for children who cannot live within their extended families. In

response, they have created a dedicated looked after children team in which workers are able to develop their understanding and experience of effective care planning. As a result, children in care with social workers from this specialist team receive more focused and effective support.

Assessments for children are not consistently updated even when there is a significant change in circumstances. This means that plans to support children are not always based on an up-to-date understanding of their needs. While reviews and revised care plans provide updates on progress, they are not full assessments of children's needs.

Disabled children are well supported by workers in a specialist team. Despite limited specialist resources to help staff communicate with children who have limited language use, they know children well. Children are cared for in suitable homes where their individual needs are met, although too many are placed at distance from Southend. This has made it more difficult for some to spend time with their families.

The pace and quality of planning is not providing all children with timely permanence or responding swiftly enough to their changing circumstances. Arrangements to confirm permanence for children by linking them to long-term foster carers have only very recently been put in place.

Independent reviewing officers (IROs) are not routinely providing clear, timebound recommendations or raising impactful challenges to ensure that children's needs for stability and security are given urgent and effective support. Staff absences within the service have meant that some children have not had their care plans and progress reviewed within the timescales needed. Increased caseloads have also limited the ability of IROs to drive progress in obtaining the right placements and services for children. Reviews are not currently written in a way that is easy for children to understand.

Placement planning meetings do not take place for all children. This causes delays in some foster carers gaining written delegated authority and receiving the child's care plan. It also means that, for some children who are starting a new placement, there is a lack of clarity about how they will be supported and by whom.

Children are visited regularly and in line with the authority's practice expectations. However, for some children, the impact of visiting is not sufficient to develop and sustain a proper relationship or to progress key pieces of work, such as life-story work.

It is not clear that creative direct work with children is given sufficient priority. Children's views, wishes and feelings are not always well captured in their records. This means it is not clear that children's views are appropriately shaping the support that they receive. Also, gaps in their records sometimes make it difficult to understand the rationale for decisions that have been made. This includes strategy

meetings that are central to decisions for children to remain in placement or to move placement.

When children's placements appear unstable and the prospect of disruption is identified, the edge of care service provides intensive, tailored, flexible support to families and children. This support reduces the likelihood of children having a change of placement.

At the time of this visit, the local authority, having been unable to identify suitable provision, was having to use unregistered children's homes for two children. Leaders and managers know these children well. They take appropriate responsibility and authorise these arrangements. These children have a range of additional vulnerabilities, including to criminal exploitation. An inconsistent approach to making referrals to the National Referral Mechanism and carrying out return home interviews means that the impact of support to reduce the likelihood of harm for these children is variable.

The local authority has responded to the need to care for a greater number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Workers use interpreters to support their assessments and visits, and children are helped to access education swiftly. While they are completed at pace, many initial assessments of newly arrived children lack depth. They do not give a real sense of the child, their background or the impact of traumatic experiences in their country of origin or during the journeys they have undergone.

The virtual school has a positive impact on the lives of children in care. They are consulted during the process of identifying placements for children and are active, not only in ensuring that children receive good education and support, but also in trying to support placements when there are concerns about stability.

Health provision and involvement in health planning for children in care are, however, less consistent. Although arrangements are in place to make timely referrals for initial health assessments, children are not yet routinely receiving their health assessments and dental checks on time. Health and social care leaders have recently established a joint working group to improve performance in this area.

The Children in Care Council involves an inclusive and enthusiastic group of children who are confident that leaders listen to their views and act in response. Children have helped develop 'care bags' of useful items and information, given to children when they enter care. They have also selected a range of anti-discrimination books now available in school libraries and were actively involved in the selection of the new Director of Children's Social Work, Early Help and Youth Support, who is due to take up the post in May 2022.

Staff speak positively about recent changes in leadership and the impact that this has had on their working environment. They describe senior leaders as being more

visible and accessible and more involved in decision-making. They value the fact that they feel well supported, are involved in developing the service and that risks are shared. An ongoing programme of training and development is available to staff, who routinely access opportunities to develop their practice.

A new approach to case file auditing has been established. The 'beyond auditing' approach means that children, families and practitioners are expected to be part of the auditing process. This is providing senior leaders with fuller information about the quality and impact of frontline practice. There is more work to do to ensure that audits and audit moderation provide constructive professional challenge to improve the support provided to children.

Leaders have recently taken steps to sensibly streamline panels, to increase their oversight of permanence, children in residential provision and the most vulnerable children. At this stage, however, children's progress is still hindered because there remains confusion about the processes for permanence decision-making. Some children experience delay because of gaps in tracking of progress in achieving permanence. Leaders know this and are putting in place arrangements to strengthen oversight and the urgency given to this work.

Most children's progress is reviewed in monthly supervision. However, in many cases, there is not a full exploration of children's presenting behaviours and the reasons that may explain them. Managers provide specific but limited direction about what needs to happen next. Actions are often task orientated and there is limited evidence of discussion and support to develop relationships with children. Supervision is not regularly being used to explore approaches and techniques to enable workers to gain a better understanding of children's views and feelings, and is not yet consistently leading to timely improvements in children's experiences.

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

Yours sincerely

Tom Anthony
Her Majesty's Inspector