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Dear Andrew

Focused visit to Sheffield children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Sheffield children's services on 21 and 22 September 2022. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Louise Walker and Teresa Godfrey.

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. Inspectors were primarily on site and met with practitioners, managers and leaders. They reviewed a range of evidence, including child records, performance data and quality assurance information, life-story work and later life letters. Inspectors used video calls for discussions with external partners and the elected portfolio holder.

Headline findings

Plans for permanence are identified at the earliest opportunity for most children. There are effective arrangements in place for quality assuring and tracking these plans to minimise drift and delay. Where drift is identified, there is evidence of effective challenge from independent reviewing officers (IROs) and senior managers. A range of permanence options are considered for children. Sensitive work is completed with children to gain their views and help them to understand and prepare for their permanent home. A small number of older children experience delay in the transition to adult services, partly due to the challenge in relation to the sufficiency of suitable accommodation for young adults with support needs.

There is strong corporate and political support for children's services and a commitment to 'doing the right thing' for children in the city. The senior leadership team and lead member provide a clear vision, and good social work can flourish. Social workers feel well supported by managers. They value the learning and career

development opportunities available to them, which enhances the support they can provide to children.

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

- The transition planning for children to adult services.
- The quality and consistency of supervision recording.

Main findings

Where children are no longer able to remain with parents, social workers put in place plans at the earliest opportunities. Where thresholds for legal proceedings are met, applications to court are made in a timely way to secure permanence for children. Reports to court are of good quality and support the decision-making and the earliest conclusion of proceedings for children.

There is strong and effective management oversight to track permanence planning for children, meaning drift and delay is minimised. Where delay is identified, effective processes are in place to challenge this.

Some children with a disability who will require support into adulthood do not always receive a smooth transition into adult services. This results in delay in progressing plans for them, particularly in relation to accommodation. When this does occur, there is evidence of challenge from the IRO and advocacy service to address this and represent children's views.

When reunification home to parents is planned, the process is thorough, supported and the views of children are considered and kept at the centre of their plans.

The fostering matching process is robust, where the needs of the children already living in the household are considered alongside those of any new child entering the foster home. This means that potential disruption is managed the best it can be.

Foster carers feel well supported through the recruitment process and ongoing training. They have established strong support networks and provide mentoring to newly approved carers, which benefits the children living with them.

The importance of children's family ties and relationships are evident when considering plans for permanence and arrangements for family time. Practitioners work hard to embed the ethos of enabling children to grow up within their birth families wherever possible.

Child placement reports are of good quality, detailed and thorough, and support decision-making and matching to take place for children. Children benefit from the

placement finding team producing individualised pen pictures that highlight their likes, what makes them happy, what they are wanting in a home and carers, and what support they need.

Culturally sensitive life-story work and later-in-life letters are completed by social workers. These provide children with a record of memories and a good understanding of their experiences, their birth family and how the people involved made the decisions about them.

An improved offer of support post special guardianship orders being granted means that children are supported to remain with carers, build attachments and do not experience statutory interventions for unnecessary lengths of time.

Senior leaders know their service well. They have identified the areas of practice that they need to strengthen to improve the experiences and outcomes for children needing permanence. They are engaging effectively with partners and the court to progress these improvement plans.

There is a comprehensive quality assurance framework in place. Not all audit activity seen was completed collaboratively with practitioners and managers. This is a missed opportunity for social workers to reflect on the impact of practice for children and families. Learning from quality assurance activity and the recognition and sharing of good practice is evident.

Supervision takes place regularly and staff report that they benefit from reflective discussions that support their practice development. However, the records reviewed did not always capture the detail of these discussions. This means that challenge, reflection and learning about the impact of practice for children and families is not always captured.

Workers spoke very positively about working for Sheffield, and having good management support by managers and senior managers who are accessible for advice and decision-making. Having manageable workloads was valued by staff, which makes it possible for them to do meaningful work with children. Staff have access to good-quality training opportunities and a career progression pathway, which is valued by them and contributes to the high social work retention rate.

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

Yours sincerely,

Louise Walker
His Majesty's Inspector