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Dear Ms Moore

Focused visit to Leicestershire children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Leicestershire children's services on 11 and 12 May 2023. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Rachel Griffiths and Nhlanganiso Nyathi.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in care, with a particular focus on:

- Decision-making for children who come into care.
- Permanence planning for children in care, including all permanence options.
- The experiences of disabled children in care.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers, managers, parents and children. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.

Headline findings

Since the previous full inspection in September 2019, when the overall effectiveness was judged to require improvement to be good, and services for children in care were judged to be good, the quality and impact of social work practice have improved. Increasing numbers of children are achieving permanence within their own family networks via special guardianship orders, and more children are achieving a sense of belonging via permanent foster placements. Social work practice with children in care, including those with a disability, is consistently child-focused. This impacts positively on their life experiences and their physical and emotional well-being.

Senior leaders have an accurate understanding of the strengths of their services for children in care. They also continue to proactively address challenges in respect of

recruitment and retention and placement sufficiency. Senior leaders know what they still need to do to ensure that every single child's journey to permanence is smooth and timely.

Main findings

Children only come into care when it is appropriate and necessary to safeguard them. The designated family judge in Leicestershire reports positively about the quality and consistency of social work practice when the local authority issues care proceedings. Most applications to court are planned, timely and well considered in order to protect children.

Social workers and managers understand the importance of children achieving permanence without delay. Permanence is usually considered before children come into care, during the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline.

A range of panels, introduced since the previous full inspection, provide senior leaders with a solid oversight of all children's circumstances and plans. These panels, as well as the regular supervision social workers receive from their managers, help progress children's permanence plans. Additionally, scrutiny and appropriate challenge by independent reviewing officers helps prevent children's plans drifting.

When children come into care, social workers consider all permanence options for children concurrently before deciding what the best permanency option is for each individual child.

The ethos of the local authority is that children should remain within their family networks if possible. As a result of this, increasing numbers of children who enter care are achieving a sense of belonging and permanence by living with family members who become their special guardians. This has been a positive outcome for many children.

For children who are unable to remain within their family network, increasing numbers of children are achieving permanence via long-term fostering. Through more robust tracking of children's care plans, the time it takes to achieve permanence in this way continues to reduce. However, a minority of children have waited too long for this formal permanence to be achieved to give them certainty about their future living arrangements. Leaders are fully aware of this, and actions are well under way to address this.

When a child's permanency plan is one of adoption, social workers start family finding early and anonymously before placement orders are granted. Some children have benefited from permanence at the earliest opportunity by living in foster for adoption placements pending court final hearings. Any delays in matching children with adopters are for either valid or unexpected reasons. Once social workers have identified adoptive matches, they undertake thoughtful and sensitive direct work with children and their new parent(s) in preparation for transitions. This helps children to settle into their adoptive family.

Social workers know the children they work with well and speak with pride and affection about them. Social workers visit children regularly, and at a frequency dictated by their needs and wishes. Beautifully written records of visits bring children to life. They evidence how social workers spend time alone with children, building trusting relationships with them and gaining an understanding of their experiences, wishes and feelings. Feedback from children about their social workers includes one child describing her social worker in a review as saving her life several times without knowing it. Another child told inspectors that their social worker had helped them grow from feeling like they had no skills to now successfully living independently, and that their social worker helped them feel better if they were in a mood. This feedback exemplifies the positive impact strong relationships between children and their social worker have had.

Social workers regularly undertake direct work with children, including cultural genograms, memory mapping and life-story work. This has helped children to understand their journey into, and through care. It has provided them with a sense of pride about who they are.

Social workers routinely update children's assessments for their six-monthly reviews. Social workers write these assessments with children, and to children, bringing their experiences, wishes and feelings to the forefront of planning.

Children's written care plans have significantly improved since the previous full inspection in 2019. Previously, they were long and difficult for children to understand. Now, social workers write them to children, and they explain in straightforward language who will be doing what, and by when, to help children achieve their goals and aspirations.

Most children in care participate in their six-monthly reviews. Minutes of these reviews, again sensitively written to children, celebrate children's uniqueness and achievements. The minutes focus on strengths and help children see the progress they are making.

Social workers in the disabled children's service visit children regularly and undertake creative direct work considering their age, specific need and communication style. As with other children in care, disabled children have sensitively written records, assessments and plans written for them, explaining their strengths and how professionals will help and support them.

Most children in care, including disabled children, live in stable and secure foster placements that meet their needs to a high standard. However, due to sufficiency challenges, a minority of disabled children with complex needs are living in placements further away from their families than leaders, children and families would like. Additionally, limited availability of short-break provisions is presenting challenges for children and carers who need and enjoy these breaks. Ambitious and realistic plans are well under way to address this, but it is too soon to see the impact of this.

Again, due to sufficiency challenges, a very small number of children are currently living in unregistered, and thus unlawful placements. While more suitable permanent placements are being identified, or while unregistered placements are seeking registration, leaders maintain strong oversight of each child's circumstances.

With strong political and corporate support, the well-established and experienced senior leadership team remains resolute in its commitment to improve the lives of children in Leicestershire. The authority's self-assessment demonstrates that leaders know their service well and demonstrates that their 'road to excellence' plan is having a positive impact on social work practice and on the experiences of children in care.

An embedded quality assurance framework, including a range of thematic and collaborative audits, provides leaders with a good understanding of the quality and impact of social work practice for children. A range of training in response to the findings of thematic audits helps to continually strengthen practice.

Leaders have been proactive in addressing challenges relating to recruitment and retention and have had some recent success in filling vacancies. Leaders fully understand that a stable, skilled workforce is vital to ensure that children maintain strong and positive relationships with social workers.

Social workers spoken to during the visit were unanimously positive about working in Leicestershire. They report having manageable caseloads that enable them to spend time with children. Social workers feel very well supported by managers and leaders at every level. Social workers, like their managers and leaders, share an ambition to continually improve the lives of children in Leicestershire.

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

Yours sincerely

Rachel Griffiths
His Majesty's Inspector