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Dear Mr Gray

Focused visit to Stockton-on-Tees local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Stockton-on-Tees children's services on 7 and 8 December 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Vicky Metheringham and Mandy Nightingale.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for planning and achieving permanence for children.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. The lead inspector and the director of children's services agreed arrangements to deliver this visit effectively while working within national and local guidelines for responding to COVID-19. This visit was carried out on site.

Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including children's electronic case records, performance management information, case file audits and other information provided by senior leaders. In addition, inspectors spoke to a range of staff, including political members, the local family judge, and social workers.

Headline findings

Since the last inspection in 2019, where services were judged to be requires improvement to be good, a determined and well-established senior leadership team has driven progress to secure permanence for children in its care. The development of robust monitoring and tracking mechanisms by service leads is preventing delays to achieving timely permanence for most children.

Committed, skilled and dedicated social workers know their children extremely well. When children become looked after, plans to secure timely and appropriate

permanence options are rigorously overseen by the independent reviewing officer's scrutiny and challenge. When children live with connected carers, assessments of their suitability are not always completed before children are placed.

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

- The timeliness and quality of the assessment of regulation 24 carers.

Main findings

COVID-19 rates in Stockton-on-Tees have been considerably above the national average, categorised as high risk throughout the pandemic. Senior leaders swiftly responded to the government requirements, recognising the impact that lockdown restrictions would have for their vulnerable children. Throughout this period, children continued to receive face-to-face visits. Social workers have been assisted to work flexibly from the home or office, and are provided with IT equipment and personal protective equipment so that they can continue to visit children and their families. Despite the pandemic, ambitious senior leaders have continued to focus their efforts on assisting children in their care to achieve permanence. Leaders are outward facing and seek external scrutiny to provide them with an evaluation of their improvement work. Social workers have felt very supported by senior leaders.

When children enter care, permanence planning begins swiftly. Good-quality and timely assessments completed by social workers provide detailed analysis as to why children become looked after. The use of multi-track planning is well thought through by social workers and their managers. A range of alternative care options for children are considered at the earliest possible opportunity. For many children, this planning begins before they enter care through a well-managed Public Law Outline process.

A weekly legal gateway panel and care planning panel have been implemented since the previous inspection. These are chaired and overseen by adept service leads. They provide an efficient forum for senior managers to oversee decision-making regarding permanence planning for children. This also ensures that plans for children are well informed and identify timebound actions to progress the child's plan. For a small number of children, there is a delay in initiating care proceedings for those who live with carers under a section 20 arrangement. However, senior managers have tight oversight of these children and set clear timescales about what social workers need to do, which are robustly monitored.

Social workers know their children extremely well. Competent social workers recognise and respond well to children's needs arising from diversity. They develop meaningful relationships with children through frequent and purposeful visits to them. The timing of these visits is led by children's needs, wishes and feelings. Direct work is undertaken with children using a variety of tools. This means that children are assisted to understand and contribute to their plans, are helped to prepare for future care arrangements and are supported to understand their life experiences.

Social workers are determined that the children experience timely, high-quality care arrangements.

Social workers actively seek alternative arrangements for children with family and friends, both at the onset of children coming into care and through effective contingency planning during care proceedings. Social workers are very committed to placing children within their extended family when assessments determine that a plan to return to their birth parents is no longer viable. For some children, these family placements are not approved before children are placed through the completion of a regulation 24 assessment. However, children's carers have been assessed through an initial viability assessment, which provides assurance that these carers can provide suitable accommodation for children. In a small number of children's cases where connected carers are unable to meet fostering regulations, if they are suitable and safe carers, strong leadership oversight and direction ensures that alternative legal orders are pursued. When family and friends are assessed and approved as connected carers, they are well supported by supervising social workers and the child's social worker.

When children require a placement away from their family home, careful consideration is given as to how foster carers and residential providers can meet children's needs. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are exceptionally well matched with experienced carers who ensure that their specific needs are met. When residential placements are deemed to be in children's best interests, a thorough consideration of available placements is undertaken to ensure that children's needs are appropriately met. Plans for children to live in long-term fostering arrangements are informed by children's wishes and their plans are ratified at children's reviews.

Social workers actively promote the use of special guardianship orders (SGO) for children at an early stage. Assessments of SGO carers consider the child's long-term needs and address how carers can meet their needs in the future. Comprehensive SGO support plans assist carers, emotionally, practically and financially. Where appropriate, children and their carers continue to receive support after the SGO order is granted.

When adoption is being considered for children, competent and child-centred social work assessments inform these plans. Service leads track and monitor all children with a potential plan of adoption. Increased consideration of foster to adopt placements and oversight of pre-birth planning is ensuring that children are provided with continuity of care and do not experience unnecessary placement moves.

Child-focused independent reviewing officers provide strong oversight of children's progress and challenge to their plans. They meet with children prior to their review meetings, and in between their reviews, to seek their views, which influence the planning for their care. Children's reviews are thorough, and they articulate clear recommendations that identify a range of timebound options which are assisting children to achieve timely permanence.

A stable and focused leadership team is driving progress in areas of permanence for children. Children's services are well supported by strong corporate and political backing. Elected members provide scrutiny, challenge and support to senior leaders through oversight of data and information. Children's services have received significant financial investment. Increased service lead capacity is driving robust oversight to secure permanence for children in care. Strong strategic relationships are established with the local judiciary, assisted by senior leaders' contributions to the local family justice board. The judiciary report improved and focused decision-making, which is informing assessments and applications to care.

Good-quality performance data provides senior leaders with contemporary information relating to the progress of children's plans. This generates robust scrutiny and challenge to managers and informs improvement activity. While quality assurance systems are improving, the current audit activity focuses too heavily on social work process and compliance. It is not informing senior leaders sufficiently of the quality of social work practice.

Social workers report that training informs and improves the quality of their practice. Social workers feel that their caseloads are mostly manageable and that available and accessible managers are responsive when they feel under pressure, providing strategies to reduce their workload. Social workers describe very supportive and visible senior leaders and managers. They thoroughly enjoy working in Stockton-on-Tees and feel valued and report very high morale.

Some supervision records are brief with limited evidence of reflection on children's experiences. However, social workers told inspectors that they receive regular personal and case supervision that supports them to reflect on their practice and provides them with clear direction.

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

Yours sincerely

Vicky Metheringham
Her Majesty's Inspector