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28 November 2024

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Dear Ms Teasdale

Focused visit to Sheffield City children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Sheffield City children's services on 29 and 30 October 2024. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Catherine Heron and Ceri Evans.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for placement decision-making for older children aged 14 to 17 years old. Inspectors also looked at the impact of leaders on social work practice in this area.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. Inspectors spoke with children, parents and carers, social workers and managers, and reviewed some children's records relevant to the scope.

Headline findings

Placement decision-making for older children in care is effective and based on children's assessed needs and plans. Social work practice is child-centred and workers understand older children's needs very well. They see beyond teenage behaviours, recognising when behaviours are the child's coping mechanisms, often in response to neglect and trauma. Older children become looked after in a timely manner and when it is in their best interests. Permanence plans are identified at the earliest opportunity and children are supported to return home or live with family members when it is safe to do so. Frontline management oversight is mostly robust, although staffing challenges in the Young Refugee Team have led to a small number of children's plans drifting, and children not having access to their written records in their own language.

Overall, senior leaders have a firm grip and clear understanding of what older children in care need and this area of practice. Leaders have created a culture of high aspirations across the council and wider partnership for older children and their

futures into adulthood. This ethos permeates into the teams working with these children, inspiring practitioners to deliver high-quality services that make a difference to children's lives.

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

- The quality of management oversight in the Young Refugee Team to better drive forward children's plans, and to ensure children have access to their written records and plans in their own language.

Main findings

Placement decision-making for older children is effective and needs-led. Most older children live in homes that are suitable, based on their assessed needs and are local to Sheffield. For older children who live out of area, these decisions are appropriate to the child's level of risk and need. These children receive regular visits from their social workers, and effective care and support that helps them to make progress. Senior leaders maintain a relentless focus on children living close to the area as possible, nearer to their family, friends and familiar places. When it is appropriate for children to move back to the area, workers progress arrangements as quickly and safely as possible.

Most children's plans are detailed and informed by children's assessed needs. Plans are regularly reviewed, with the involvement of the child's network and where appropriate, the child's parents. Independent reviewing officers apply effective challenge when children's plans are drifting, or when they are concerned about social work practice which is impacting on children's experiences.

Children who present as homeless receive a strong and effective service. Children's family members are routinely consulted, and mediation is offered to help where relationships may be problematic. Children are always informed of their rights, and all accommodation options are explored, including the option to move into local authority care. Assessments are carried out sometimes in partnership with the housing officer to better understand the child's circumstances and their accommodation needs. Inspectors were able to see good evidence of children's wishes being well documented and acted upon. One child told the inspector about when they presented as homeless and the support they received. The child described their social worker and said: 'She is a good listener, very empathetic and went above and beyond. She helped me a lot.'

When older children are unable to return home, kinship care is the first alternative that is considered by social workers. Family members or other connected people whom the child knows are approached to support the child and provide care, if it is safe to do so. Assessments of kinship carers are timely, thorough and result in recommendations that are in children's best interests. Kinship carers say that they are well supported, financially, practically and emotionally, by Sheffield City Council.

These carers feel part of the fostering family because they meet other kinship carers and share advice and experiences with each other. Kinship carers say that they feel valued for the positive contribution that they make to children's lives.

When older children can return home, purposeful work is carried out to ensure that this happens in a timely, safe and planned way. Workers recognise the challenges of reunifying children home to their parents' care, particularly after long periods of separation. Parents are appropriately supported to access necessary advice and resources so that they are better prepared to resume care, and more able to meet their child's needs in the longer term.

Children are seen regularly and alone by their workers, except for a small number of children supported by the Young Refugee Team. The vast majority of children have positive relationships with their workers, which helps children to talk about their stories and influence their care plans. When these relationships are more of a challenge, workers are persistent and tenacious in overcoming barriers and building positive relationships with the child.

Older disabled children in care are well supported to make progress. Disabled children benefit from excellent relationships with their workers, who use creative approaches to direct work so that children's experiences, wishes and feelings are well understood. Workers advocate strongly for children to help them receive the services that they need, particularly as children reach adulthood, moving from children to adult services.

Senior leaders acknowledge the challenges of finding the right placement for older children in care, particularly for those children with complex needs and vulnerabilities. Despite these challenges, only a very small number of children out of necessity experience placement moves, or live in homes that are not registered with Ofsted. Workers, managers and senior leaders understand very well the risks associated with children living in unregistered homes and recognise that placement instability often contributes to a range of poor outcomes for children. For these reasons, senior leaders ensure robust additional oversight and monitoring of children's safety and well-being when children live in temporary or unregistered placements. Searching for an alternative registered home is prioritised, alongside workers visiting children more often, close liaison with the child's family and network where appropriate, and additional scrutiny from the council's commissioning service.

When older children do need to move placements, plans for the move are carefully considered. Workers plan ahead wherever possible, to minimise disruption for children. As a result, children usually experience well-planned introductions to their new home, which helps them to cope better with the change.

The quality of care in the council's children's homes has significantly improved during the past 12 months. This has impacted positively on the children who live in these homes, on their progress and their experiences. Senior leaders know there is more

work needed to sustain these changes and increase the options available for older children's care. The sufficiency strategy remains a key priority and leaders are thinking creatively how to deliver on this objective.

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are supported by a newly created Young Refugee Team. Since it was established, the team has experienced instability in management and staffing alongside an increased demand for the service. The absence of robust management oversight has led to a lack of progress in a small number of children's plans and has affected the quality of service to these children. Leaders had already recognised the challenges within this team prior to this visit. They have responded appropriately with meaningful plans to address this issue.

There is strong and continued political and corporate support for children and families' services. Relationships between the children's services senior leaders, the council's chief executive and the chair of the children's committee are supportive, with appropriate respective challenge. As a collective, these leaders are aspirational, with a shared vision to deliver high-quality services to older children in care in Sheffield.

Positively, there is growing interest from the wider council directorates to collaborate more with children's services. They are 'leaning in' more to the conversation with senior leaders on how to build children and families' resilience and strengthen communities within Sheffield.

Senior leaders have a clear line of sight to practice supported by effective quality assurance systems and good use of external scrutiny and challenge. This results in leaders knowing this area of their service well, its strengths and what needs to improve.

Workers are highly committed and proud of the difference they make to children's lives. Overall, there is positive morale among the workers, and this is reflected in the stability of the workforce. At times, workloads are very busy, depending on what is happening for children and how much they need their workers. Managers have the necessary oversight of work pressures and caseloads and workers receive additional support when needed.

Workers spoken to during the visit told inspectors that they have the right conditions to practice safely and effectively. Workers told inspectors that they value the approach of their managers and senior leaders, whom they find are visible, approachable and caring. Workers receive advice and guidance when needed, and formal supervision takes place regularly. Although workers describe these conversations as reflective and helpful in care planning for children, written records in children's files do not always reflect this. Leaders are acutely aware of this and have supervision as an area for practice improvement high on their planning agenda.

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

Yours sincerely

Catherine Heron
His Majesty's Inspector