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31 August 2022

Graham Reiter and Audrey Kingham  
Interim Joint Directors of Children's Services  
Northumberland  
County Hall  
Morpeth  
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Dear Mr Reiter and Ms Kingham

### **Focused visit to Northumberland children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Northumberland children's services on 26 and 27 July 2022. Her Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Jo Warburton and Victoria Horsefield.

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 looked at a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers and carers, and meeting with a District Family Judge. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information, children's case records, life story books and later life letters.

### **Headline Findings**

Social workers identify permanence plans for children at the earliest opportunity. This helps most children to achieve permanence in a timely way. Social workers know their children well. They use personalised and sensitive tools to communicate effectively with children and prepare them for permanence. An established quality assurance framework assists senior leaders and managers in monitoring the progression of children's plans and the quality of social work practice. A small number of older children and children with complex needs experience drift due to multiple placements or changes of social worker. Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) monitor children's progress to achieve permanence, but the impact of their challenge and escalation to managers is not well reflected in children's records. Social workers describe feeling

supported and valued by their managers. They appreciate the learning and service development opportunities provided by senior leaders. These opportunities enhance their practice in order to support children in achieving permanence. Managers provide regular case supervision for social workers. However, records do not consistently state the agreed action plan or reflections discussed.

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

- The impact of IRO's escalation and challenge needs to improve.
- The recording and impact of supervision needs to improve.

### **Main findings**

The senior leadership team provides strong and effective oversight when children need to achieve permanence. An established quality assurance framework assists senior leaders and managers in monitoring the progression of children's plans and the quality of social work practice. There are robust tracking systems and panels in place to review children's progress. Senior leaders support managers and social workers to make timely and effective decisions about children's futures. While some of the quality assurance tools are still being embedded, there are indications that senior leader's recommendations following practice days are driving improvement around recording of supervision and evidencing the child's voice.

When risks to children are identified pre-birth, social workers complete thorough assessments. Parents are appropriately supported in order to provide the best opportunity for children to remain living at home with them. Where assessments and interventions do not lead to the desired outcome for children, prompt action is taken to ensure the child is placed with permanent carers at the earliest opportunity. Family members are considered as alternatives to foster care. Plans for permanence are well considered for babies and younger children with evidence of early presentation to legal planning meetings.

Children's permanence plans meet their individual needs. Children are carefully matched to long term foster carers following robust fostering panel and agency decision-making processes. This includes early planning for older children staying put within the foster family.

IROs effectively oversee and scrutinise children's care plans and ensure that children's current wishes and feelings are given full consideration. They appropriately raise challenges with team managers when they identify any drift or delay in care planning. While team managers reply promptly to the IRO challenge, children's records do not demonstrate how this process leads to progress for the child.

Timely legal advice ensures that public law proceedings are initiated swiftly when children need legal permanence. The Designated Family Judge reports an improvement in the quality of work, including how the child's voice is evidenced within reports, and describes effective communication with senior leaders to resolve any issues. Senior managers recently reviewed children placed at home with parents on care orders. This led to a significant number of children's care orders being safely discharged. Children whose permanence needs can be met through adoption or special guardianship are identified swiftly. Both special guardians and adoptive parents are provided with enhanced support in order to help children develop early attachments. Families are therefore not experiencing unnecessary or prolonged statutory intervention.

Child permanence workers have caseloads that allow them the time to undertake intensive and focused work with children. Workers advocate on behalf of the child to ensure that permanence is achieved at the earliest opportunity and in the child's best interests. They create sensitively written life story books and later life letters to help a child understand their journey at the child's own pace. Child permanence workers and foster carers speak positively about a practice model which has been recently introduced by senior leaders. They appreciate that children's introductions to adoptive parents are completed at the child's pace and promote continuing contact with foster carers post placement where appropriate.

A small number of children have multiple placements or changes of social worker. While for many of these children the delay was outside of the local authority's control, placement disruption impacts on children building trusting relationships or achieving permanence in a timely way.

Children have a well-planned change of social worker when they transition to the Northumberland Adolescent Service. Social workers are sensitive to this change and take time to help children get to know them before proceeding with the change. Children in this service benefit from access to a range of professionals, including emotional well-being and youth justice practitioners, where appropriate, who provide the child with wrap-around care.

Social workers know their children well and have a good understanding of their histories and permanence plans. Social workers encourage children, including disabled children by using communication aids to express their views about their plans. Social workers do not always capture within children's records the creative engagement work they complete. This does not provide the most meaningful memories for children of their care experience.

Social workers are positive about the supervision and support they receive from their managers. There is variability in the quality of supervision records, with some supervision being task and process focused. However, workers could describe a

more reflective discussion. Supervision records do not reflect well enough how managers, through supervision, drive plans or identify drift and delay for children.

All of the social workers spoken to by inspectors during the visit were positive about working for Northumberland. They describe managers as supportive and available to them. The social workers enjoy the range of work allocated to them. Social workers are becoming familiar with the more recent framework developments of the practice model. Many of them have appreciated how the model champions provide opportunities for reflective discussion within their teams.

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

Yours sincerely

Jo Warburton  
Her Majesty's Inspector