

24 October 2024

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Dear Ms Harrison

Focused visit to Birmingham children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Birmingham children's services on 24 and 25 September 2024. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Rebecca Quested and Lisa Walsh.

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

- Quality of matching, placement and decision-making for children in care.
- Experiences and progress of disabled children in care.
- Experiences and progress of children living in supported accommodation or an unregistered children's home.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

Headline findings

Most children benefit from living in homes which are stable and well matched to meet their needs. Whenever possible, children live within their family network. When that is not possible, social workers ensure that children are living in homes which meet their specific individual needs and with carers who support them to make progress.

Many children benefit from meaningful relationships with social workers who have taken time to build strong and caring relationships with them. Social workers demonstrate a real curiosity and passion to ensure they listen to children and are effective in meeting their needs.

There have been significant changes since the last inspection within Birmingham City Council (BCC) and Birmingham Children's Trust (BCT). BCC has issued a section 114

notice due to insurmountable financial pressures and there have been significant changes in the most senior leaders in BCT. Despite these challenges, it is to the credit of BCC and BCT that vulnerable children have been prioritised and frontline services protected.

Senior leaders in BCT understand the strengths and challenges within their service. The new chief executive is improving social work practice for most children in care. Although there has been some progress made in securing legal permanence for children who are currently living with their parents or family on care orders, this has not happened at a pace which reflects children's needs. Leaders recognise this and have plans in place to develop a dedicated team to ensure that children are subject to statutory intervention for no longer than necessary. For a very small number of children living in unregistered children's homes, the strategic and managerial oversight of support to children and review of their circumstances is inconsistent.

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

- The strategic and managerial oversight of children living in unregistered children's homes.
- The pace with which decisions are made and action is taken to change the legal status of children living in permanent stable homes, reflecting their needs.

Main findings

Many children benefit from meaningful relationships with social workers who have taken time to build strong and caring relationships with them. Social workers speak with pride about their children and say things like 'I love them.'

Social work visits to children are purposeful. This means that children are receiving the right level of support to meet their individual needs. Children's case records of these visits are detailed and sensitively written to the child. The relational social work practice model used is evident in what is discussed and how it is recorded. Children are listened to, including their views about where and with who they live.

Social workers use the relational practice model effectively, promoting ongoing relationships and supporting children to spend time with family members in appropriate venues. Visits to children are used by social workers to explore children's wishes and anxieties about how well family time is progressing. Plans are adapted in accordance with children's views.

Where children in care are at risk, they receive timely and proportionate responses to reduce risk and help to keep them safe.

Children's health needs are promoted. Children have regular health assessments and attend opticians' and dental appointments as required. Children's emotional well-being and mental health needs are met through BCT's own therapeutic emotional

support service (TESS) as well as receiving therapeutic support provided where children live and go to school.

Most children are making academic progress at school. Social workers work collaboratively with the virtual school and education partners to good effect. Regular personal education plan meetings take place to ensure that appropriate support is in place for children. When older children are not attending education, training or employment, social workers support them to pursue their interests to find the right college place or apprenticeship.

Children are encouraged to pursue their interests and hobbies. This helps them to have fun and socialise.

There has been an increase in the number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in care. They receive a timely response, with a well-coordinated offer of support, and decisions to accommodate are made promptly. Children's wide-ranging needs are well met, including access to legal advice to progress asylum claims. Social workers place an emphasis on education, with all attending school or college. Children are supported to live close to others from their community with access to local amenities to support their cultural and identity needs. Social workers are also curious and alive to the vulnerability of this group of children. As a result, children are settled and supported.

Disabled children who are in care benefit from consistent and strong relationships with their social workers. Social workers visit children regularly and communicate with them in a style that meets the child's needs. This ensures that children's needs and wishes are well understood to inform their care planning.

Most disabled children are living in suitable homes where they are happy and thriving and making good progress. Social workers are resourceful in creating support packages to maintain children in their family homes. When that is not possible, social workers ensure that the homes children move to are well matched to their identified needs. Social workers explore opportunities for permanence through special guardianship for disabled children where this is appropriate.

Many children are living in stable and settled homes where they can thrive. Where possible, they are living with their family or brothers and sisters. Social workers understand the benefits of these arrangements in respect of children's identity and sense of belonging.

Social workers complete comprehensive and timely initial viability assessments when plans are explored for children to live in kinship care. Decisions are appropriately endorsed by managers and senior leaders, supporting a shared approach to decision-making. This provides social workers with assurance that they are not working in isolation to ensure the immediate and ongoing safety of children.

For some children in long-term kinship care, consideration is given to plans of special guardianship orders being made. Plans are not consistently progressed at pace for all

of these children, meaning that for some they are subject to statutory intervention for longer than necessary.

Children return to live with their parents following comprehensive assessments of parents' capacity to meet their children's needs. Children's voices inform these assessments as well as those of family members and professionals. Children's individual needs are considered and transition planning is effective. Senior leaders provide clear rationales for supporting these decisions. As a result, children are able to return to live permanently with their parents safely and to thrive. There has been some progress in discharging care orders for those children who are living at home with their parents. This requires more pace and senior leaders are developing a dedicated team to support children to secure their legal permanence with their parents.

Children in care are well supported by caring social workers, with a focus on achieving early permanence for them. Opportunities for early permanence through foster to adopt are explored when parental or kinship care is not possible. Social workers have a good understanding of children's needs, the impact of moving on from carers and how to manage and support this sensitively.

Care and attention are taken to ensure that children are appropriately matched with adopters who can best meet their needs. When a match is made, prompt, creative and carefully considered transition plans are developed at a pace to support children to settle within their adoptive homes.

Children who are living in supported accommodation are receiving the right level of help to enable them to develop their independence and prepare for adult life while living in a nurturing environment. Their views are respected and advocated for, with children's voices shaping future care planning.

Children living in supported accommodation receive tailored support to help them maintain their health and well-being. Many have meaningful relationships with adults who can support them. Children are visited regularly by social workers who know them well. The frequency of visiting reflects children's changing needs.

BCT has significantly reduced the number of children living in unregistered children's homes since the last inspection through the development of a greater variety of resources and improved relationships with providers. Currently, a very small number of children are living in unregistered children's homes. Children only move to these illegal arrangements by necessity when a registered placement cannot be found. BCT works with Ofsted to support providers to become registered. Children are supported to make progress in the short time they are living in unregistered children's homes, such as attending health appointments, seeing their families and enjoying their hobbies. Children move on to suitable regulated care swiftly.

There is managerial and leadership oversight and authorisation in relation to decisions to move children into unregistered children's homes. However, there is

variability in the promptness of this being recorded. During the visit, senior leaders told us they recognise that they need to prioritise improved consistency in the updating of these vulnerable children's records.

Since the last inspection in March 2023, there have been significant changes in the senior leadership of Birmingham Children's Trust (BCT) and in the circumstances of Birmingham City Council (BCC). These changes in leadership have been mitigated through the stability provided by the statutory director of children's services (DCS) within the council and the previous chief executive of BCT moving to be chair of the BCT board, which also provides continuity.

The current chief executive of BCT has been in post for 10 months and is building on the existing positive relationship with the council. The council's financial circumstances have led to intervention from the government. Despite these financial challenges, it is to the council's credit that it has continued to prioritise the needs of vulnerable children in Birmingham through its support for BCT in delivering children's social care. Consequently, BCT is currently able to protect frontline services for children. The chief executive of BCT remains focused on ensuring that the council maintains its corporate responsibility for children in Birmingham.

Senior leaders in BCT understand the strengths and challenges within their service. The high levels of child poverty in the city, coupled with the cost of living crisis, place pressures on resources. A recent planned restructuring of the senior leadership team has taken place, streamlining capacity. New improvement plans overseen by an improvement board have also been developed to drive forward plans focusing on earlier intervention, embedding and gaining greater consistency of practice. It is too early to evaluate the impact of these changes.

There are strategic systems in place to provide oversight of children's progress to securing permanence through various trackers. Some of these are more effective than others in monitoring and reviewing children's progress. Senior leaders have recognised that there are delays for some children, including children on care orders living with their parents, in securing the change of legal status and have plans to improve the pace of this.

There are established quality assurance arrangements in place. Senior leaders have identified that more needs to be done to achieve consistency across the city in the quantity and quality of the practice evaluation process. Investment has begun in recruiting staff to address the variability in the use and impact of this process. The practice evaluation tool used supports a focus on areas of strength and areas for improvement and is completed collaboratively with social workers who value the reflectiveness of these conversations about their practice. There are missed opportunities to gain feedback from children, families and carers to support insight into the impact of practice, with few consulted. A 'closing the loop' system is in place to ensure there is impact for individual children although it is not consistently being used to improve practice.

Social workers told inspectors that they feel well informed about changes within BCT. They receive weekly blogs and 'shout-outs' from senior leaders which promote positive morale within the workforce.

Social workers benefit from a comprehensive training offer. They enjoy using the relational practice model 'Connections Count' which informs their practice. Newly qualified social workers receive good levels of support. They describe their induction positively and value the monthly training with their peer cohort. The capped caseloads they have support their development.

Management oversight and supervision are mostly regular and well recorded. Managers routinely provide a clear and appropriate rationale for decisions on children's case records, including assessments and plans. Some records lack specific and timebound actions to progress children's plans more effectively.

Social workers are positive about the support they receive from managers and leaders at all levels. Caseloads are manageable and social workers report that they are busy but they feel well supported in their practice. Consequently, social workers are able to develop meaningful relationships with children. They demonstrate a real curiosity and passion to ensure they listen to children and are effective in meeting their needs. Social workers are proud of their work and their children's progress.

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

Yours sincerely

Rebecca Quested
His Majesty's Inspector