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Dear Ms Siggins

Focused visit to Bracknell Forest local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Bracknell Forest local authority children's services on 21 and 22 November 2023. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Joy Howick and Michelle Woodward.

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

- Decision-making for children in long-term care.
- The effectiveness of the support and permanence planning for children living long term with foster carers.
- 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; this included discussions with social workers, managers, parents and children. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information, and children's records.

Headline findings

Since the previous inspection in June 2022, when the experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers were judged as good, the quality and impact of social work practice for children in care, including disabled children, have continued to improve.

Increasing numbers of children are achieving permanence within their own family networks as a result of effective reunification plans. Many other children are settled well with their long-term foster carers. Social workers act quickly and effectively if concerns arise that may destabilise living arrangements, working with multi-disciplinary professionals as necessary. Children are supported well to reach their own goals, which improves their life chances and emotional well-being.

Senior leaders have a detailed knowledge of children's progress. This enables them to maintain an accurate understanding of the strengths and areas for development of services for children in care, including disabled children. They act collaboratively with partners to develop sustainable solutions, especially for increasing placement sufficiency.

Main findings

Senior leaders chair a range of panels which provide them with a detailed oversight of children's well-being and their progress at key points towards permanence. These panels provide effective decision-making points to support each child's unique circumstances and enable timely progression of permanence plans.

Children in care are supported to return to their families whenever possible. Social workers complete detailed assessments that are scrutinised and tracked by senior managers before children return home, to ensure that the right decisions are made in children's best interests. A wide range of support and skilled intervention from a multi-disciplinary team, including therapists and family support adolescent workers, enables many children to remain with their families or foster carers or to return home from care safely. Many children return home to their parents or live within the extended family network, with a small number of family members becoming special guardians. The high quality of special guardianship assessments demonstrates child-centred planning with a view to the sustainability of the placement until the child reaches adulthood.

When a child's permanence plan is for adoption, social workers ensure that family finding is timely. Children are carefully matched with families without delay, enabling them to benefit from permanence at the earliest opportunity and their adoptions are completed promptly.

Social workers know and understand the needs of the children in their care. They visit children regularly and at a frequency that enables the creation of a trusting relationship. Children are seen alone by their social workers, with time spent on purposeful activities that children enjoy. For children placed at a distance, visits continue to be timely, and access is prioritised for them to benefit from specialist practitioner support in their own environment. The notes of children's visits by their social workers are carefully written to children. These are intended to create a valuable record for children, should they wish to access this information as an adult.

The local authority has made a commitment to all children with a plan of long-term foster care to provide high-quality life-story books as a record of their time in care. This is not yet fully in place for all children, but an accurate tracker is supporting implementation. The examples seen of life-story book work were impressive and something to be treasured.

Children receive timely life journey work with drama and family therapists to address earlier trauma. Foster carers and children's home staff are also provided with training from this team of therapists. This supports them in caring for children with complex needs and is effective in helping to maintain the stability of placements.

Social workers routinely update children's assessments for their six-monthly reviews. They capture children's views clearly and are ambitious for their futures. The reviews

are child focused and plans are written to the child. Most children attend their reviews, with beneficial use made of independent visitors to support them. The minutes of reviews consistently report on the positive achievements that an individual child has made. The independent reviewing officers (IROs) challenge adults in the child's life to seek ways to further strengthen their support to the child. If children are not making the progress anticipated, there is a simple route to ensure that a child's case is reviewed at a multi-agency panel that looks for creative solutions to support children more effectively.

IROs work collaboratively with social work teams and influence practice when it needs to improve for children. There is appropriate use of escalations when this is necessary to ensure that the right care plan is in place. IROs are developing ways to support more children to chair their own reviews.

Plans clearly set out the actions required by each adult in the child's life. This accountability helps to ensure that children get the help that they need to enable them to achieve their full potential. Social workers ensure that the child's wishes are reflected in their plans, and children's plans now consistently demonstrate the most appropriate actions to promote their life chances. For any child coming back to read their records, they would understand the rationale for how decisions were made by professionals for them at that time.

Disabled children have their needs for permanence considered well. They are suitably matched with their carers at panel. Effective transition planning takes place with adult services for those children who will need continued support into adulthood. The children also receive appropriate life journey work to help them to understand their journey in care. This is provided in accordance with their communication needs.

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking (UAS) children are well supported and live with culturally matched foster carers or in supported accommodation. Assessments are comprehensive and lead to bespoke plans to address their needs. There is effective use made of translators on social workers' visits, but UAS children do not receive a translated copy of their well-written plans or letters in their own language. There are plans in place to address this.

Children engage in co-designing and improving services for children in care with the local authority staff. There is a good range of participation activities in place for children in care and care leavers, with a number of events taking place regularly to allow the children and care leavers to meet each other, have fun together and to meet senior leaders and elected members. Children in care and care leavers are involved in the recruitment of staff, including leaders. They deliver training to foster carers and to staff on a variety of topics, including how to make social work visits the best experience for a child.

Children who go missing are supported effectively by the Make Safe team. Staff in the Make Safe service provide timely return home interviews. They continue to engage with these children, building lasting, impactful relationships that help to reduce their missing from care episodes.

Unregistered children's home provision is rarely used and only as a last resort when more suitable arrangements cannot be found. Placements are only made with

authorisation by the director of children's services. The quality of the placement is kept under regular review, with more frequent visiting patterns.

Audits are reflective and consider the impact of practice on children. Senior managers use the findings to improve practice. For example, actions are now in place to create a straightforward checking process to evidence that plans have been shared with children and families.

The corporate parenting board provides effective scrutiny of services provided to children. Detailed reports provided by staff are subject to appropriate probing by the elected members.

The combination of internal audits together with a comprehensive range of key child-centred quality assurance measures ensures that managers have clear oversight of service strengths and areas for development.

An impressive array of performance data is shared with managers on a daily basis to ensure that social workers are completing timely actions such as home visits and reviews, so no child is lost from view. This enables senior leaders to have a clear line of sight on social work practice and how well this is securing permanence for children.

Social workers receive regular supervision from their managers. Supervision records consistently include actions that are tailored to each child. Senior leaders are aware that some supervision records are more a summary of events rather than a reflection on practice. They are already taking action to improve the quality of these records.

Social workers are very positive about working in Bracknell Forest. Caseloads are manageable and allow workers to have time to spend with children. Staff feel valued and that they can progress in their social work career. They feel well supported by managers and leaders and, together with senior leaders, are ambitious for the children in their care.

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

Yours sincerely

Joy Howick
His Majesty's Inspector