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Dear Ms Lyons

Focused visit to Stoke-on-Trent children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Stoke-on-Trent children's services on 4 and 5 October 2023. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Rebecca Quested and Nick Bennison.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for planning and achieving permanence for children up to the age of 10 years.

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, managers and independent reviewing officers (IROs). They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.

Headline findings

Since the last standard inspection in October 2022, when the overall effectiveness of the service was judged to be requires improvement to be good, senior leaders have maintained a focus on planning and achieving permanence for children and improving the quality of social work practice in Stoke-on-Trent. As a result, more children are achieving security and stability through permanence at home with their parents, with connected carers or foster carers and through adoption. Senior leaders continue to develop the service and have introduced numerous strategies to ensure that early permanence is secured for children. The impact of this is beginning to reduce the numbers of children entering the Public Law Outline (PLO) pre-proceedings process, and more children are being diverted from care.

Senior leaders have an accurate understanding of the strengths of their service and the areas which require further development. They continue to proactively address challenges in respect of recruitment and retention. However, there is inconsistency in the quality of management oversight to support the progression of children's plans and ensure that life story work is carried out with all children.

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

- Life-story work for all children, to support their understanding of their experiences and the decision-making about their lives.
- Consistency of management oversight.

Main findings

Most social workers across children's services consider children's need for stability and permanence throughout their interventions. This means that more children than previously in Stoke-on-Trent have secure long-term living arrangements.

Early permanence planning for unborn children is effective. Social workers identify the need for pre-birth assessments appropriately and complete them in a timely manner. Assessments are comprehensive in considering risks, strengths and the impact of families' histories on plans for unborn children.

Children's progress within the PLO is monitored effectively and their outcomes have improved, with most children remaining at home in their parents' care when it is appropriate to do so. Since the last inspection, senior leaders have expanded the family group conference team and their service is now offered earlier to consider how family members and friends can support children to remain living with their families. Multi-track planning is evident when children are on child protection plans, as well as for children in the PLO process. This includes the assessment of family members as connected carers, parenting assessments and substance misuse testing. This more robust consideration of securing permanence for children who are on child protection plans has resulted in fewer children needing to be stepped up into the PLO process.

Social workers know their children well. They take time getting to know families to ensure that decision-making is right for children. Most visits to children are thoughtfully recorded with a real sense of each child and their needs, including for babies and non-verbal disabled children, where observations inform social workers' understanding of their experiences.

The voice of the child is strong throughout children's records, including in their reviews. For some children, detailed and sensitive life-story work is undertaken that helps them to understand their history and how important decisions have been made in their lives. However, this remains too inconsistent, and there is more to do to ensure that all children in care benefit from life-story work. Before the inspection, senior leaders had already taken steps to improve practice in this area, which was further sharpened during the visit.

IROs ensure that most children's plans are progressing. Increased capacity in the IRO service means that they now have time to undertake mid-point reviews with social workers to ensure plans remain on course. When there are delays or concerns

about care planning, IROs escalate these quickly and appropriately. This has led to positive changes in care planning for children.

Most children come into care at the right time for them. Senior leaders have introduced an additional management process of 'challenge to care'. This provides a useful opportunity to reflect on children's progress and outcomes and how risks can be managed before decisions are made to have a legal gateway meeting. A recent restructuring has created specific court teams to work with children through court proceedings. A case progression officer provides additional monitoring of the progress of these children and positive outcomes have been achieved for children, with recent care proceedings being completed within 26 weeks.

There is flexibility in the decision-making and care planning for children, which means that most children, including disabled children, live in the right place for them in the long term. Social workers complete detailed assessments to understand whether children can live with their brothers and sisters when that is in their best interests. There is active consideration of whether special guardianship orders (SGOs) would now better meet the needs for children who are already matched long term with their foster carers. A no detriment policy and thorough assessment process have resulted in a quarter of children aged under 10 who left care having their permanence secured through an SGO. Similarly, a reunification team has been established to enable children who are living with their parents under the auspices of a care order to have these discharged. This means that more children have security and stability without the unnecessary intervention of children's services, where that is safe and in their best interests.

Adoption work is a strength in Stoke-on-Trent. More children are achieving permanence through adoption. Good use is made of fostering to adopt arrangements where this is appropriate. Children in these situations achieve early permanence and benefit from being able to develop secure, stable attachments from birth or as very young babies. When older babies and children move to live with their adopters, social workers are skilled in planning these transitions to ensure their success. This includes holding valuable appreciation meetings and the timely completion of life-story books. Social workers are equally skilled in supporting birth parents to be part of this process. This work is reducing the risk of adoptions breaking down and is increasing stability for children.

With strong political and corporate support, the well-established and experienced senior leadership team is improving the outcomes for children in Stoke-on-Trent. The authority's self-assessment demonstrates that leaders know their service well and identifies the many strategies that are being embedded which secure early permanence for children. This includes work to prevent children coming into care, including the imminent introduction of the Pause project, as well as the effective use of data and management systems to provide monitoring of children's permanence plans, both when they live at home and when they are in care. This is improving

arrangements for planning and achieving permanence for children up to the age of 10 years.

Management oversight is inconsistent. When there is oversight, the quality has improved since the last inspection and stronger examples show how social work practice is challenged to ensure that children's plans are progressed. For some children, important decisions are not recorded by managers. This does not provide clear accountability or ensure that children, when they read their records now or in the future, can understand how these decisions have been made.

Quality assurance processes provide leaders with an understanding of the quality of social work practice. A low number of full case audits, alongside a focus on compliance, limits a more thorough evaluation of the impact of social work practice on improving children's lives. There are missed opportunities to gain family feedback, to add richness to audits through understanding their experiences of social work intervention.

The senior leadership team in children's services is visible and approachable and leads a caring culture. Social workers report feeling well supported by their team managers and service managers, formally through supervision and informally. They told inspectors they enjoy working in Stoke-on-Trent because of the supportive colleagues and managers.

Social workers say their induction when they are new to children's services is comprehensive. They value the learning and development offer and identify this as a strength. Social workers and IROs state that the offer has been significantly widened and made more up to date since the last inspection. Equally, the practice standards framework is viewed as providing a supportive framework that enables all workers to be clear about the expectations around their roles.

Most social workers report that their caseloads are manageable. For a minority, they are too high, which impacts on their ability to complete tasks, including visiting children in a timely way. Social workers are positive about the restructuring of teams to support more manageable caseloads and improve quality of work across children's services. These changes are already resulting in improving outcomes for children.

Supervision mostly takes place regularly and provides challenge and guidance to social workers to progress children's plans. When there are changes of social worker or management oversight is less rigorous, children's progress can be delayed.

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