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16 November 2018

Judith Finlay
Executive Director
London Borough of Ealing
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Dear Ms Finlay,

Focused visit to Ealing local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Ealing local authority children's services on 24 and 25 October 2018. The inspectors were Brenda McLaughlin and Maire Atherton, two of Her Majesty's Inspectors.

Inspectors evaluated the quality of care planning for children in care, and the timeliness of permanence arrangements for children who are unable to live with their birth parents. Inspectors assessed practice to prevent children from coming into the care of the local authority, as well as the quality of support that is provided to reunify children with their families. They measured progress made in these areas of practice since the last inspection.

A range of evidence was considered during the visit, including discussions with social workers and their managers and with clinical psychologists. Inspectors looked in detail at children's cases. They met with the virtual school team and those local authority senior managers who are involved in public law outline (PLO) planning for children who meet the threshold for care proceedings. Inspectors reviewed the quality of support that is provided to adoptive parents and special guardians and care leavers. In addition, they evaluated relevant performance management and

quality assurance arrangements, and the effectiveness of supervision and support for frontline social work staff.

Overview

Since the single inspection in 2016, when services were judged to be good, dedicated senior managers and political leaders have continued to transform services by implementing their hugely innovative 'Brighter Futures' programme. The local authority is an extremely ambitious corporate parent. Each child in care in Ealing is surrounded by a team of professionals who work together closely to provide exceptional care and support. There is a tangible determination from those who are involved with children in care to provide a nurturing environment that meets children's and carers' emotional needs. Staff say that: they feel valued by their leaders and managers; caseloads are manageable; and the retention of social workers, particularly in the connect teams, is improving. Routine, reflective solution-focused group supervision provides a safe place for team members to come together to share their concerns about children. Specific dedicated teams provide excellent help and support to care leavers and to children who are at risk of coming into care and to those who return home to live with their families. Rigorous performance management and quality assurance means that managers at all levels are very knowledgeable about their service and the areas that need to improve. For example, senior managers have acted quickly to address the quality of practice in the care planning court work team and they are aware that they need to do more to ensure that all children benefit from parallel planning. They are actively working to improve the quality of kinship assessments and case recording.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The consistency and timeliness of parallel plans for all children who cannot live with their birth parents.
- The quality and consistency of kinship assessments.
- The recording of managers' decisions following legal and permanence planning panels.

Findings

- The co-location and direct line management of fostering social workers with the social workers who are responsible for children in care, supported by clinical psychologists, enable suitably trained staff to work collaboratively to

provide emotionally sensitive care to children. This innovative model is underpinned by research, and in Ealing it is ensuring that children's lived experiences and histories, including personal trauma, are understood. The patient, respectful and child-centred approach leads to a more sophisticated and holistic analysis of children's needs which, in turn, informs care plans and is improving placement stability.

- Foster carers are offered an 18-week training programme, 'nurturing attachments', that helps them to understand the impact of developmental trauma on the children that they care for. The training provides a helpful peer support framework and, using therapeutic parenting techniques, assists carers to develop strategies to care for children. Clinical psychologists routinely meet with foster carers to ensure that they are supported to understand each child's identified needs and, where necessary, strategies to manage children's behaviour are implemented. Psychologists also work directly with parents and family members to support them to rebuild or improve their relationship with children. Strong support for adopters and special guardians is provided quickly and is ongoing, helping children to settle and to remain safely with their new families.
- Weekly group supervision is a crucial part of the practice model. All children in care cases are presented monthly to a multi-disciplinary team. Inspectors observed thoughtful reflection, analysis and deliberation about complex issues within these meetings. Staff told inspectors that this 'team around the worker' culture reduces their feelings of isolation and helps to ensure that the team shares the risks. The approach has created an environment in which social workers feel listened to and are supported to develop their skills and knowledge. This is helping children to remain safe in care. Social workers know children well. Life-story work to help children to understand their personal histories and experiences is carried out with sensitivity. Positively, this is a continuous process and not a one-off event.
- The local authority is committed to securing permanent homes for children if they are unable to live safely with their birth parents, including those for whom it is considered to be harder to find adoptive parents. Foster to adopt is considered in most cases where this is appropriate, and early permanence planning is evident for most children. However, this is not consistent enough for all children and inspectors asked the local authority to review a small number of cases where there had been a delay in progressing family finding. For example, parallel planning stops for some children when a connected

person's assessment is deemed to be positive but the likelihood of friends or family members caring safely for children has not yet been assured. In addition, there is some variation in the quality of connected persons assessments, although this is often because of the tight timescales that have been set by the court during care proceedings.

- Arrangements to track children through legal and permanence planning panels are well embedded and are mostly effective in preventing delay. Planning for those children who are unable to live safely with their parents was progressed speedily in most cases seen by inspectors. Management actions and decisions about each child's journey to permanence are not always recorded clearly enough. Care plans and assessments are comprehensive and are updated for each review. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) provide good-quality written records following each review. IROs bring additional safeguarding scrutiny by monitoring children's progress between reviews. The timeliness of children looked after reviews and the level of participation by children in their reviews, both at 96%, are very good.
- Bespoke, targeted work, undertaken by dedicated teams, is making a real difference to vulnerable adolescents, helping them either to remain safely at home with their families or to live in alternative accommodation that is tailored to their specific needs. The social workers in these teams told inspectors that they have the capacity to build rapport with children. They work closely with partner agencies to support and prevent harm to young people who are being criminally or sexually exploited.
- The staff who support care leavers understand permanence in its widest sense in the context of young people's life stories. The team, which includes a clinical psychologist, has fully embraced the relationship-based practice model. These staff understand the specific needs of young people, and tailored support is provided by those who are best placed to meet these needs. The 'staying put' policy is well established, supporting young people to access higher education as well as promoting enduring relationships between young people and their foster carers.
- Staff understand the many and varied needs of unaccompanied minors. They are creative in exploring different ways to engage these often-traumatised children in helping them to understand and express their feelings. Some unaccompanied minors are participating in art therapy, and others have benefited from the National Citizenship Scheme.

- Permanence planning for children with disabilities or with complex needs is good. Children are supported effectively to maintain contact with the people who are important to them if they are unable to live with their birth families.

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

Yours sincerely
Brenda McLaughlin.
Her Majesty's Inspector