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Dear Mel Meggs

Focused visit to Kirklees children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Kirklees children's services on 6 and 7 October 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Vicky Metheringham and Rachel Holden.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for the experiences of children in care and, in particular, the quality of matching, placement and decision-making for children in care. They also looked at the quality of management oversight, and whether performance management information and quality assurance activities provide managers with an accurate view of social work practice to help senior leaders improve outcomes for children.

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

Headline findings

Continuously ambitious and effective senior leaders have created a culture where strong social work practice improves outcomes for children in care who are in need of permanence. Skilled and committed social workers provide sensitive, child-centred practice to children and their carers.

Despite the challenges of the pandemic, a wide range of effective services have been developed to support children and their carers. As a result, many children are benefiting from improved placement stability and live in timely, well-matched permanent placements. Staff report that professional development is strongly encouraged and supported. However, supervision does not take place frequently enough for some social workers with their direct line managers.

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

- The quality and frequency of social work supervision, including management oversight of children's progress and experiences.

Main findings

Despite the ongoing pressure of the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic, senior leaders have continued to prioritise improvements to services for children in care, underpinned by strong corporate and political support.

Comprehensive and analytical assessments inform decision-making for children in need of permanent care outside of their birth family. Assessments demonstrate thoughtful engagement with children and families and influence children's plans. Family group conferences are used consistently to support children to remain at home where it is safe to do so, with support from their family. When children cannot live with their birth family, robust assessments are undertaken with family members and relevant connected persons. Effective and timely use of the Public Law Outline ensures swift progression to care proceedings when children require permanence.

The use of a child-friendly care plan has recently been introduced as a better way to ensure that children's views are sought and that they are well informed of their plans. There is inconsistency in how these plans are used and they are still being developed.

There is a strong focus on direct work, which is helping children develop relationships with their social workers. Social workers know their children extremely well. They visit children in accordance with their needs and wishes, even through the pandemic. Most children are supported by social workers who remain working with them for long periods of time, which supports children to develop trust within these relationships. Children enjoy and receive support from the involvement of children's rights workers and from independent visitors. These professionals help children to understand their rights and ensure that their voice is fully represented in plans that affect them.

Children are benefiting from living in a range of well-matched, stable placements. Arrangements for securing permanence for children and young people are monitored effectively and tracked by senior managers and by children's independent reviewing officers (IROs) to enable children to achieve permanence in a timely way. Particular attention is paid to children's holistic needs during the matching process. This includes children's emotional well-being and educational needs. Sensitive consideration of children's cultural and identity needs informs their plans and the interventions and support needed.

Wherever possible, children are matched effectively to their placement and the rationale for the decision is consistently recorded. Social workers are relentless in their efforts to secure permanent homes for children. Carers benefit from a plethora of therapeutic interventions and support from the local authority. This includes support from the local authority's emotional well-being clinic, where a multi-disciplinary team meets to provide consultation and advice and clinical psychological support to carers and social workers.

IROs robustly review children's care plans. They provide time-bound actions, which they follow up in between reviews so that plans for children progress swiftly. Informal and formal resolution processes are used effectively when drift is identified. Children's reviews are well attended by a range of partner agencies, who commit to taking actions to improve children's experiences and outcomes.

Young people are supported to make transitions to independent living with good-quality, semi-supported unregulated accommodation. They receive effective support from key workers and social workers.

Political leaders scrutinise performance data and challenge senior social care leaders in relation to the progress and outcomes for children in care. The lead member is very well informed through performance data. She is a champion for children across the council and holds members and senior officers to account on their corporate parenting responsibilities.

Senior leaders have a good understanding about the quality of practice and children's experiences. They are supported by good performance data. Data is analysed through regular performance management meetings, which influences senior leaders' actions and priorities. Robust quality assurance processes are augmented by practice learning days and case reviews. Social workers benefit from these learning events and report that this learning enhances the quality of their work with children and their families. Social work practice is also strengthened through the array of training and development that is available to them.

Not all social workers benefit from regular supervision from their line manager, or reflection with their manager about the progress of children's plans. Risk is mitigated by the tenacity of the social workers, who have reflective discussions and receive case direction from the skilled, advanced practitioners. Social workers value this support and its contribution to their practice.

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

Yours sincerely

Vicky Metheringham
Her Majesty's Inspector