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Dear Edwina

Focused visit to Lancashire children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Lancashire children's services on 4 November 2019. The inspectors were Lorna Schlechte, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Shabana Abasi, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for achieving permanence. This included children who had returned home, connected carers, long-term foster or residential care and special guardianship, but did not extend to adoption services.

Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.

Overview

Following the last inspection in 2018, the local authority recognised the need to drive improvement in relation to permanence planning for children in care. However, the pace of improvement has only accelerated since the beginning of this year. Senior leaders have been responsive to external scrutiny from peer reviews and other partners, they have recently implemented a new permanence policy and they have introduced new systems and tools to scrutinise the quality of work more closely in this area.

This is leading to a more organised approach to permanence so that the need to live in secure and caring homes for the duration of their childhood is being appropriately considered for more children. However, some children still wait too long to achieve permanence with their long-term carers, which means that this approach is not yet fully embedded across children's services. Progress in achieving permanence in a timely manner is affected by the inconsistent quality of assessments, plans and management oversight on the child's record. Consequently, it is not always clear how decisions to achieve permanence are made within the child's timeframe.

The new senior leadership team is appropriately focused on reducing very high numbers of children in care. Senior leaders have developed a more robust audit framework, which accurately identifies shortfalls in practice. There continues to be a strong focus on developing the workforce by providing a range of valued training opportunities to embed good practice. Social workers are a committed staff group, and report positively on their learning within a supportive work environment. Further work is required to continue the journey of improvement and to ensure that there is greater consistency across the service to reduce drift and delay for children.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- Assessments that are of a consistently good standard.
- Plans that provide detailed actions and timescales to measure progress.
- Timely and purposeful direct work with children to help them understand their plan.
- Management oversight that provides a clear rationale for permanence decisions and reduces drift and delay.

Findings

- Children come into care appropriately, although there are sometimes missed opportunities to initiate legal proceedings earlier for children who are living in families where there is a history of chronic neglect. More recently, pre-proceedings have been used to good effect to ensure that decisive action is taken promptly and that children are safeguarded when they are at risk of harm.
- Children live in appropriate, mostly stable placements, within the county. They are well cared for and have their needs met. In many cases, children's outcomes improve due to a range of support, and this helps them to develop and thrive in care. This includes significant support in relation to their emotional and well-being needs. Arrangements for children to see their families and friends are sensitively considered, well supported and reviewed on a regular basis.
- When children can return home safely, comprehensive home placement agreements are put in place. These identify how the child's needs can be met and guide social workers in their work with the child and family. Sometimes, there is an over-optimistic assessment of parental capacity in these situations, which has led to some children returning home prematurely. However, when children do make progress at home, the decision to discharge the care order is well considered and is informed by detailed assessments of need and packages of support. The local authority has made some progress in addressing the number of discharges for a significant cohort of children placed on a care order at home with their parents.

- The number of children who are placed with connected carers has increased. These placements are appropriately considered and the carers are assessed as potential permanent carers for children who cannot return home to their parents. However, the ratification of these arrangements through special guardianship is not always timely, which leads to some delay for children and their carers who would benefit from securing legal permanence at an earlier stage.
- The quality of children's assessments is too variable and this is recognised by senior managers. Assessments are updated regularly, including when children's circumstances change, and historical risk factors are clearly articulated. However, assessments do not always include information from partner agencies and sometimes they lack detailed analysis about the impact for children.
- The quality of care plans is also variable. In the stronger examples, plans record outcomes and the child's views well. In the weaker examples, they contain too much narrative, lack detail and specificity regarding actions and timescales, and do not include contingency arrangements. This makes it difficult to measure progress or to fully understand how options to secure permanence can be achieved within the child's timescales.
- Children's review meetings are regular and well attended, with children frequently encouraged to participate. The number of independent reviewing officers (IROs) has increased since the last inspection, and they have been provided with more bespoke training. This investment in the IRO role is reflected in the review record, which provides a clear rationale for why the child is in care, with actions being well recorded and permanence increasingly being considered at the child's second review meeting. There is also evidence of the IRO footprint on the child's record, through mid-review monitoring of compliance and practice issues. However, in those cases where there has been some delay securing permanence, it is not always evident that the IRO escalation process has provided robust challenge.
- Visits to children are regular, purposeful and children are seen alone. Social workers know their children well and develop good relationships with them, although this is not always reflected in the child's record. For example, some social workers highlight the child's voice in bold in the record, but do not provide analysis of what this means for the child's lived experience.
- Direct work with children is sometimes limited and subject to delay. In some instances, it is clearly referenced in the care plan and seeks to help children understand what has happened to them, and what the plans are for their future. However, children can wait too long for life-story work to be undertaken, which means that they do not always have timely access to the support needed to help them understand their experiences.
- The local authority has a detailed understanding of the needs of children and has developed its sufficiency strategy to ensure that most placements can meet children's needs within the county. This includes 'track and challenge' forums for

children in residential placements and new commissioning arrangements for block purchasing residential placements locally. Funding has recently been secured to develop foster carer recruitment initiatives with neighbouring local authorities on a collaborative basis, although it is too soon to see the impact of this.

- A new permanence policy was implemented earlier this year and is helping the local authority to achieve a stronger focus on achieving permanence across the service. A permanence tracker, introduced early in 2019, is a comprehensive tool which helps managers to monitor the progress of children who need to be matched long-term, discharged from care or found suitable adoptive placements.
- Permanence panels are held across the locality areas and provide a useful mechanism to regularly scrutinise permanence plans. Panel records include an overview of children's circumstances, although it is not always clear how actions will support the timely progression of permanence planning. As a result, some children wait too long to have their placement formally matched at panel in line with their care plan. There has been a significant drive in recent months to ensure that all historic cases are ratified as long-term foster placements at exemption panels, but this has sometimes followed a period of significant delay. This means that some children experience unnecessary insecurity about their future care as they wait for permanence to be agreed.
- The practice issues of drift and delay are recognised by senior managers. They acknowledge that further improvements are needed to reduce the disproportionately high numbers of children in care. There is an appropriate improvement plan in place which supports future developments, including a strengthened family group conference service and the planned investment in a new model of practice.
- Performance is scrutinised within monthly performance clinics, which ensures that variability of practice across a wide geographical area is increasingly understood. This activity informs the audit process, which is thorough and balanced, and provides accurate insight into the quality of care planning for children in care. There is evidence of some learning from audits, especially those which are completed in discussion with social workers and their managers.
- Management oversight within supervision is regular, but the records of these discussions are often too brief and task focused, and they lack reflection about the most appropriate routes to permanence and the impact for children. The rationale for permanence decisions is not always evident within supervision records in order to help social workers develop their understanding of how to achieve permanence within the child's timescales.
- Caseloads are too high for some social workers, although senior managers report that these are reducing, and there has been a reliance on agency staff in some areas. Experienced agency staff are used to provide additional capacity to teams with less experienced social workers. Turnover rates for permanent members of

staff are quite low, and the workforce development strategy and action plan provides a firm basis for professional development.

- Social workers spoke very positively about the supportive team environment in Lancashire, the accessibility of managers and the training provided to help them do the job. Newly qualified social workers were also positive about the support they receive. Purposeful practice workshops continue to be facilitated by advanced practitioners on a range of practice issues, as seen at the time of the last inspection, and are highly valued by staff.

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

Yours sincerely

Lorna Schlechte
Her Majesty's Inspector