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Dear Ms Barnett

Focused visit to West Northamptonshire children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to West Northamptonshire children's services on 15 and 16 April 2025. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Rachel Griffiths and Rebecca Dubbins.

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

- Decision-making for children coming into care.
- Care and permanence planning.
- The experiences and progress of children living in unregistered provision.

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 discussions with social workers, managers, carers and children. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.

Headline findings

Since the previous full inspection in October 2022, West Northamptonshire Council has continued its arrangement with Northamptonshire Children's Trust (NCT) for the discharge of its statutory children's social care functions.

Since that inspection, when the overall effectiveness of the service, and services for children in care, were judged to be requires improvement to be good, leaders have maintained a firm focus on continual improvement. Leaders have an accurate understanding of their strengths and the successes of their improvement plans so far. This includes increased stability in the workforce, improvements in the quality of assessments of the needs of children in care, and significant progress in reducing the numbers of children living in unregistered children's homes through a comprehensive sufficiency strategy.

Leaders also fully understand what still needs to improve. They continue to address challenges in the effectiveness of permanency planning, the quality and impact of front-line management oversight and supervision, and the quality of children's case records.

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

- The effectiveness of permanency planning so that every child has a positive sense of security and belonging where they live (Outcome 4 National Framework).
- The quality and effectiveness of management oversight (Enabler 2, National Framework).
- The quality of case recording so that children have a coherent account of their journey in care and the reasons and rationale for decisions made about them. (Enabler 2, National Framework).

Main findings

The number of children entering care in West Northamptonshire has reduced, influenced by a leadership and workforce commitment and ambition to support children to remain living with their parents or within their family networks, when it is safe to do so. Increasing numbers of children who come into care are also benefiting from living arrangements within their family networks, via kinship arrangements. When this is not possible, when children enter care, most move to live in foster placements or children's homes that meet their needs well.

Most very young children who come into care do so in a planned and timely way. However, some older children have lived in neglectful or emotionally harmful circumstances for too long before decisive action is taken to escalate arrangements to protect them by bringing them into care.

When children come into care, social workers are increasingly understanding the importance of children achieving permanence without delay. They consider a range of permanence options concurrently before deciding what the best permanency option is for individual children. A range of permanency meetings and panels, strengthened since the previous inspection, are helping to promote timelier permanence for more children.

For some children, there are still avoidable delays in helping them to experience permanence. This is compounded by complicated electronic systems and poor recording, which sometimes make it difficult to see the impact that permanence meetings and panels are having in progressing permanence plans. For some children living with kinship carers, there are delays in special guardianship orders being progressed with the support of the local authority to secure children's futures without the need for ongoing statutory intervention. Likewise, for children living in foster care, while improved since the previous inspection, some have continued to wait for too long before having certainty about their long-term living arrangements.

Some children in care, who have been living with their parents for a long time under placement with parent arrangements, have experienced drift and delay in permanence decisions being progressed as a result of the local authority's delay in applying for the care order to be discharged. Therefore, some children are living with statutory involvement for longer than is required. Additionally, a small number of children have lived with their parents in unstable environments where their needs have not been consistently met without decisive action being taken to safeguard them at an earlier time. For some younger children living in children's homes, while these homes are currently right for them, records relating to children's permanency planning fail to consistently evidence the actions social workers are taking to secure their long-term futures, or the reasons why there has been a delay in securing permanence.

When a child's permanency plan is one of adoption, social workers start family finding early. Some children have benefited from early permanence by living with foster carers who adopt them. Social workers carefully consider children's unique needs and personalities and their compatibility with potential adopters. This includes whether direct relationships with birth parents and brothers and sisters can be maintained.

For children in care whose plan is not one of adoption, a new assessment tool is helping social workers have a greater focus on children's individual needs and how the team around children can meet these. For some children, this has resulted in a successful return home. Other children have moved to a home that better meets their needs. For those children already living in the right home, it has resulted in bespoke help and support to help them thrive.

Leaders are aware that there remains more to do to fully embed this approach, to ensure that social workers consistently update children's assessments when their circumstances change. Additionally, some updated assessments do not always translate into clear and comprehensive written plans that confirm who will be doing what, and by when, to meet the identified needs.

Most children attend their reviews and some chair or co-chair them. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) consider children's needs well and make appropriate recommendations in children's best interests. When there is drift in care planning, IROs identify this, but they do not consistently escalate it to a higher level to prevent the drift continuing.

Most children in care enjoy positive relationships with consistent social workers who know them well. Social workers talk about the children they support with pride and warmth. Using a relational approach, social workers help children develop trust in them, so that children feel confident sharing their worries and aspirations with them. The quality and impact of direct work with children has improved since the previous inspection, and this includes life-story work with more children to understand and make sense of their experiences. Leaders are aware that there is more to do to make sure that every child in care receives high-quality life-story work at the right time.

Most children in care live in homes that meet their needs, where they have positive experiences and make progress in all or many aspects of their lives.

Due to ongoing sufficiency challenges, a small, and significantly reduced, number of children since the previous inspection live in unsuitable and unregistered children's homes. Social workers visit these children regularly to monitor their welfare. In the interim, active searches for suitable homes continue, including commissioning providers to create bespoke homes for individual children, in line with the authority's sufficiency strategy, and leaders encouraging providers to become registered children's homes.

With strong political and corporate support, a well-established and experienced leadership team remains resolute in its commitment to every child in care having a sense of belonging and positive experiences. The designated family judge confirmed this. They highlighted that leaders always seek and act on feedback and that leaders have created a culture of continual learning and improvement, which is evident in the openness and practice of social workers within the family court arena.

The local authority's self-assessment is accurate. Leaders have made significant progress in stabilising the workforce, meaning that children in care benefit from consistent social workers who enjoy spending time with them.

Leaders are fully aware that weaknesses remain with the quality and impact of management oversight of practice, case supervision, and how management decision-making is recorded in children's records. While social workers told inspectors that they feel well supported by their managers, this is not always evident from supervision records. These records are not always accessible on children's files and often lack clear actions with timescales to help progress children's plans. These shortfalls mean that should a child want to read their records in the future, they would not have a coherent record of the decisions made about their care and the rationale for these.

Since the previous inspection, leaders have refreshed and updated quality assurance systems. Regular collaborative, reflective, practice discussions (CRPDs) held with social workers are providing leaders with a clear line of sight of children's experiences. Leaders are in the process of strengthening the consistency and quality of the CRPDs so that they provide improved oversight of the quality of practice, include feedback from children and carers, and maximise learning opportunities for workers individually as well as for the wider workforce.

During the visit, social workers were unanimously positive about working for NCT. They said that they feel valued and exceptionally well supported by managers and leaders at every level of the organisation. Staff cite this level of support, the comprehensive training and development opportunities, and manageable caseloads as reasons why they continue to work for NCT, with some agency workers converting to becoming permanent as a result.

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

Yours sincerely

Rachel Griffiths
His Majesty's Inspector