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Dear Jon

Focused visit to Rotherham local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Rotherham local authority children's services on 21 and 22 March 2019. The inspectors were Ian Young, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Rachel Holden, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for permanence planning, including early permanence for children looked after.

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 reviewed children's case records.

Overview

Children looked after by Rotherham Borough Council who need permanence in their lives are receiving a strong service. Progress is evident since the last inspection in 2017, when services for children looked after were judged to require improvement.

Effective strategic planning by senior leaders has significantly improved permanence planning for children in care in a coherent and sustainable fashion. Senior leaders have successfully made use of the council's existing strengths, such as performance reporting, together with increased management oversight of children's individual circumstances, to achieve sustained improvement.

Significant partners, such as the Child and Family Courts Advisory Service (CAFCAS) and the courts, report an increasing amount of good-quality social work. Social

workers can articulate their plans for children in care clearly. They see children regularly and know them very well. Written plans are less well expressed because they do not always clearly state the outcomes expected for children and are not always timebound.

All children in care whose cases were reviewed by inspectors had a plan for permanence firmly in place. This means that there is a real focus on securing their long-term future through both a wide range of different legal orders and finding a variety of places for them to live. In a small number of examples, due to a lack of enough in-house options, children were living in unregulated placements. Safeguarding risks are not always assessed robustly enough to inform placement planning and permanence.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The quality and consistency of written planning, so that it matches up to social workers' verbal accounts of their plans.
- Sufficiency of in-house options, to avoid the use of unregulated placements when finding places for children in care to live.
- Risk assessments, where risk has potential implications for stability in the lives of children in care.

Findings

- A renewed focus on the needs of children in long-term care through senior leaders' 'Right Child Right Care' project has resulted in children's continuing needs being reassessed and options for permanence being successfully delivered. The project has also produced a sustainable framework of permanence planning for those children who are new into care.
- Unborn or new-born babies are getting an improved service because more assertive action is now taken earlier with mothers who are in a cycle of having their children removed. Inspectors saw strong evidence of twin tracking to achieve timely permanence for these babies, including adoption, special guardianship orders and reunification with family where it is safe to do so.
- Reassessment of children's need for permanence, together with more assertive action for unborn or new-born babies, has resulted in a recognised increase in children's cases being presented to court. The standard of social workers' presentation and reporting to court has evidently improved and this is supported by partners such as CAFCAS and the local judiciary, who say that this is now mostly of good quality. It would benefit from being more consistent and timelier to avoid delay in the court's timetable while any deficits are resolved in children's permanence arrangements.

- Notwithstanding the lack of enough in-house options, children in care are generally found places to live that match their unique needs. Therapeutic support is readily available for all children in care, and this promotes stability and prevents breakdown. Some of these arrangements are creative and well adapted to the child's needs, but a small number are unregulated. This means that the council cannot be assured that these arrangements are subject to regulatory scrutiny. For a small number of children subject to section 20 of the Children Act 1989, parental consent for placement is not compliant with legal guidance.
- Senior leaders are reflective and adaptive, and they run a learning organisation. For example, when the last inspection identified improvement in permanence planning as an area for development, they conducted two peer reviews. They have evidently taken on board learning from these reviews, for instance children's cases having too many transfer points, and have resolved the issues identified. Children in care can now get to know their long-term social worker at the earliest opportunity and this promotes effective relationship building.
- Senior leaders can demonstrate a good understanding of frontline practice. They manage an effective panel system and maintain a detailed placement tracker. Through this activity, they show a high level of awareness of children's individual needs. Overall, management audit is also of good quality and contributes to a strong understanding among senior managers of frontline practice. This means that senior leaders can effectively deliver projects and plans, because they understand in detail the needs of children in the care population.
- A useful bespoke performance reporting tool allows frontline managers to manage compliance with statutory guidance. This works well. For instance, all children are seen, and their cases are reviewed at least at statutory minimum levels. Some good examples were also seen of reflective supervision sessions between frontline managers and social workers impacting directly on the care of the child. However, the current required frequency of supervision means that if a session is missed there can be significant gaps, and this might potentially delay swift planning for some individual children.
- The council has secured a permanent workforce of social workers who are well trained and make good use of established social work models when addressing risk and protective factors. Safeguarding risk management could be better, as it does not always closely inform permanence planning in the way it should. Assessments do not always sufficiently capture the unique identity of the child, for example their ethnicity. This means that matching with suitable carers is made more difficult than it needs to be.
- Social workers report high workloads, and inspection evidence demonstrates that there are several exacerbating factors to this situation. The local authority has had a higher number of children placed in care over the past two years, leading to increased use of placements outside of the borough. This means that social workers must undertake out of authority visits more frequently to build and

maintain relationships with children in care. An increased demand in relation to managing children's contact with their birth families means that social workers currently manage a proportion of this activity, leading to significant travel implications. An increased complexity of need has been identified as children come into care, and this demands a high degree of social work intervention to ensure that plans are progressed effectively. The combination of these factors means that high workloads can lead to some undesirable delays, such as in the completion of life-story work and later-life letters for children achieving permanence through adoption. Given the pressures on their time, it is to social workers' credit that they make more visits than statutory minimum levels to children on their caseloads and know them so well.

- Reviews of children's plans are well attended and well recorded, but actions identified do not always drive progress in plans for permanence, because they do not address deficits in social workers' plans by stating clear outcomes and deadlines. Independent Reviewing Officers' (IROs') footprints are evident from files looked at, although their impact is not always apparent. Intelligence gathered by IROs does not inform wider organisational learning. For instance, the IRO annual report is discursive and is not linked to strategic initiatives such as 'Right Child Right Care'.

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

Yours sincerely

Ian Young
Her Majesty's Inspector