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Dear Ms Harrison

Focused visit to Birmingham children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Birmingham children's services on 27 and 28 October 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Alison Smale and John Roughton.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in care.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. Children's services in Birmingham are provided by Birmingham Children's Trust on behalf of the local authority. Inspectors were primarily on site meeting with trust staff and children in care. A blended approach has been implemented, with social workers working from home with access to an office hub. Social workers have continued to support children in care during the pandemic through a mix of remote visits using technology and face-to-face visits based on risk assessments. Since COVID-19 restrictions have been reduced, social workers' visits to see children are nearly all face to face.

Headline findings

Most children in care benefit from living with settled carers who meet their needs. Social workers know children well and ensure that, for most children, their views help inform plans for their future. Children make progress in care and are supported to do well in school and enjoy their childhood. Most children benefit from stable and well-matched placements which meet their needs. Social workers advocate strongly for their children, and effective professional networks ensure that children's needs are understood and progressed. A very small number of children who have experienced unplanned placement disruptions have been placed in unregistered children's homes. For those children aged 16 to 17 years old placed in unregistered children's homes, there has been insufficient management oversight to assure the quality of placements.

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

- Quality assurance and management oversight of unregistered placements for 16 to 17-year-olds.
- Statutory reviews when children experience unplanned placement breakdowns.
- Timeliness of personal adviser allocation for children transitioning to the leaving care service.
- Take-up of return home interviews when children go missing from home or care.
- Clarity within children's plans and reviews about what children and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) are delivering for children.

Main findings

Children become looked after when it is in their best interest. Care proceedings are initiated appropriately based on clear management decision-making. Planning for children to come into care, including care proceedings, is timely and well managed, based on a clear rationale. Holistic assessments ensure that children's needs are well understood and inform their plans. Children's wider family members are increasingly considered as future carers, with the support of family group conferences to explore this. The impact of identity and ethnicity varies in how well these are addressed in assessments and plans. While some practice is stronger, such as for unaccompanied asylum seekers, not all intervention is sensitive enough to children's cultural needs.

Children benefit from regular child-focused assessments, prior to their statutory review, which track progress and ensure that plans adapt to changing needs. Key decisions are effectively made for most children and recorded on children's files through management summaries and looked after child reviews. Early permanence decisions are well considered, and when these need to change they are reviewed effectively. Managers and independent reviewing officers (IROs) escalate concerns effectively to resolve issues of emerging concern and stop them becoming serious. Care planning meetings, introduced by senior managers, to ensure that plans are progressed between reviews are not yet well embedded, which reduces the quality of partnership working.

Social workers know their children well and listen to them, and consider their wishes and feelings. IROs ensure effective oversight of children's plans, with regular monitoring between reviews. Most children benefit from conversations with their IROs to ensure that their views are understood and can incorporate their wishes and feelings into each review. Children are encouraged to participate in their reviews. Where this is not possible, they have access to effective advocacy, or will agree how their views can be represented to inform plans.

For a small number of children who experience unplanned placement breakdowns, reviews are not brought forward. This means the child's plan is not reviewed when there has been a substantive change, to ensure that the new plan and placement arrangements meet the needs of these very vulnerable children.

Decisions to place children in unregistered homes have been made following extensive searches. For the very small number of children aged under 16 years, who are placed in unregistered placements, there is additional management oversight to monitor progress and decision-making to ensure that the right support is in place for children in these circumstances. Since September 2021, new standards and protocols have been implemented. This assures senior managers that arrangements are assessed, and risk managed to mitigate the potential risks of a placement in an unregistered children's home. The small number of unregistered placements for 16 to 17-year-olds are not subject to the same level of senior management oversight, meaning that there is not the same level of assurance that children are well cared for. When alerted to this by inspectors, senior managers agreed during the visit that this would be addressed.

Children in care who have a disability are in stable and well-matched placements. They benefit from consistent care which meets their complex physical and emotional needs. Social workers develop meaningful relationships with children and use a range of communication techniques to understand children's needs. Every effort is made to support children to be cared for within their extended family. Social workers work closely with carers and others to ensure that educational progress is achieved for children in care.

Children in care can participate in the Children in Care Council (CiCC) and engage with a range of projects and activities which actively benefit other children, for example the perinatal pathway work, breaking the cycle, and the children's placement forms refresh. Inspectors met with the CiCC, which expressed variable experience of the continuity of their social workers and understanding of how they access advocacy.

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children receive a responsive and sensitive service, which ensures that their needs are well met by social workers who have developed knowledgeable specialist expertise.

When children go missing, return home interviews are routinely offered. Take-up, however, remains too low, meaning that a full enough understanding of the reason children go missing is not gained. When exploitation risks are identified, they are addressed well in conjunction with the specialist service Empower U and the wider professional network. Direct work undertaken by social workers helps children understand grooming and exploitation risks.

Physical health is addressed in detail through children's plans. Children's mental health and emotional needs improve through accessing in-house therapeutic emotional support service (TESS) which social workers can access for children in care. When children's needs are more complex and CAMHS are involved, there is insufficient clarity and communication within children's plans and reviews about what CAMHS are delivering for children.

Children make positive progress and are well supported to have high aspirations and achieve in school and college. Older children are supported to consider their education and employment options, whether these be apprenticeships, college, or university. The range of apprenticeship opportunities created both within the trust, the council and beyond is a positive development that is increasing opportunities, and children are beginning to benefit from this.

For some children, the transition to leaving care support is too late. Not all children are fully aware of their options and rights as they leave care, which can cause anxiety about their future. Early consideration is given to staying put and, where children need to transition to a different placement, they are supported to do so in a planned way so that it is a positive experience.

With consistent senior leadership, the trust is establishing a more child-focused culture which supports stronger social work practice. Wide-ranging improvement programmes with key partners are making a positive difference for many children in care. These include the TESS service, family group conferences, learning from disruptions, and an improved approach to supporting connected carers. Leaders are aware and working closely with the courts to reduce the length of care proceedings, which for some children delay the finalisation of permanence outcomes.

Social workers value the range of learning opportunities such as the regularly recorded webinars and practice forums on contemporary social work practice-related issues. The offer to social workers in their first year of practice and social work apprenticeships is building an increasingly stable workforce who like working for the trust.

Internal scrutiny and challenge are evident through a range of performance reports and meetings. Senior managers understand the service well and work quickly to address weakening performance. A comprehensive and effective approach to assuring quality of practice and impact for children has been implemented and is starting to have an effect on the quality of practice. Audits provide critical evaluation and reflection of practice, with clear recommendations leading to improvement actions. This has started to inform organisational learning and development programmes, for example through webinars on areas of practice such as supervision and assessments.

Supervision of social workers is increasingly reflective and explores the impact of social work practice for the child. Actions arising from supervision, however, are too process based, without timescales and do not always reflect the wider work that social workers are doing. Most social workers' caseloads are manageable, enabling them to spend positive time with children, getting to know them and building trusting relationships.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning the next inspection or visit. I am copying this letter to Andy Couldrick, Chief Executive, Birmingham Children's Trust.

Yours sincerely

Alison Smale
Her Majesty's Inspector

Pre-publication