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Dear Ms Ioannides

Monitoring visit to Croydon children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Croydon children's services on 3 and 4 October 2018. The visit was the fourth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in September 2017. The inspectors were Louise Hocking and Anne Waterman, Her Majesty's Inspectors, and Tracey Nurse, Ofsted Inspector.

The local authority is making progress in improving services for its children and young people. However, senior managers need to ensure that progress is consistent for all children and at a pace that meets each child's needs. They are aware of the work that is still required and the need for continuing improvements to the quality of frontline practice. A permanent executive director for children, families and education has recently been appointed, and takes up his post in December.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made for children in care, including thresholds and permanence planning.

This included the experiences of:

- children who had recently become looked after
- children who had been in care for more than 12 months
- unaccompanied asylum-seeking children
- children with a plan for adoption
- children in care who have a disability
- children placed at a distance
- care leavers.

A range of evidence was considered during the visit, including evidence from electronic case records and meetings with social workers, team managers, service leads and independent reviewing officers (IROs). We also considered information and data regarding permanency trackers, performance information, the complaints process and the use of independent visitors and advocates for children in care.

Overview

Some children in care are experiencing drift and delay in securing their permanence arrangements. In particular, this affects children who have been waiting to be formally matched with their current carer, although drift is also occurring for very young children with a plan for adoption. Practice is generally better for children who have come into care more recently, although more urgency is needed to prevent drift in securing permanency.

Most children are well placed and benefit from secure and stable placements. The core components of effective social work practice for children in care are in place. Thresholds are applied effectively for children who need to be in care. Children are visited frequently, and they have an appropriate care plan. The majority of children's records contain helpful case summaries and clear case notes that broadly reflect their wishes and feelings. Social workers show a high degree of commitment to the children they work with and they are proud of each child's achievements.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Too many children in care in Croydon experience delay in having permanency secured for them. Most children who have been in care for more than a year are well settled in suitable placements, but there is a lack of urgency in ensuring that these placements are formally matched. There is insufficient understanding of the emotional impact that such delay will have on children, and senior leaders need to tackle this legacy of drift for children with additional pace. Tracking systems are in place, but they have not been used effectively to drive improvements for all of the children who are waiting to be permanently matched.

In most cases, social workers know children well, and inspectors saw positive examples of work with children in care. This included some particularly strong and thoughtful practice. Life-story work is not yet fully embedded as a necessary part of permanency planning for all children. However, some social workers are sensitive to the timing of this work and have acted accordingly.

Practice is generally better for children who have come into care more recently, although it is still not undertaken with sufficient urgency. Staff in the looked after children service, now renamed the corporate parenting service, report that when cases are transferred to them, they have to catch up on actions that should have taken place earlier. Family group conferences are particularly slow to be arranged, meaning that a significant early opportunity to explore permanence options within the wider family may be missed.

There is drift and delay for some very young children with a plan for adoption and it is taking too long to find an adoptive family. For some of these young children, interested adopters have not been pursued and opportunities to place them sooner have been missed.

Senior managers are aware that they need to ensure that all practitioners understand what good permanency planning practice looks like, that this is driven with urgency and that it is supported by helpful policies, procedures and panel processes, including panel availability.

Social workers in the corporate parenting service report an unsettled period. This is reflected in staff turnover and some staff report that they feel demoralised about working in the service. Although staff and managers are committed, there is some potential instability for the three teams for local children in care that do not have permanent managers. Social workers in the corporate parenting service have an average caseload of 14 to 15 children. However, some staff feel that their caseloads are hard to manage, due to the complexity of casework, the need to 'catch up' with historic actions, and processes and systems that do not support their work sufficiently. Senior managers are aware of these concerns and of the need to stabilise the workforce further to sustain and accelerate the improvements being made.

The service for care leavers is showing improvement and is benefiting from the importance that has been placed on it. This area of work is particularly championed by the lead member for children. The development of the recently launched 'local offer' involved young people directly and is ambitious. Staff morale in the leaving care service is high. Staff report feeling more fully part of the whole service for children who have been in care. Staff are committed to the young people they work with. However, high caseloads in the service have reduced the frequency of visits and resulted in some delays to the timeliness of reviews of pathway plans. Additional resources have been identified, and staff are aware of this. The vast majority of care leavers are in suitable accommodation. Work to further develop 'staying put' has led to an increase in young people remaining with their foster carers; 48 young people are currently in 'staying put' arrangements.

Progress can be seen in management oversight, with management involvement evident on virtually all case records seen by inspectors. The extent and quality of management oversight remain variable, ranging from basic factual notes through to well-evidenced reflective supervision. Staff report that they find their managers accessible and supportive in style, but there is a lack of clarity about the frequency of supervision.

IROs are beginning to provide more effective challenge, although this had not had sufficient impact on some of the plans for children seen during this visit. However, there have been 27 examples of formal escalation over the last three months, including two to the director of social care and one to Cafcass. Positive progress can also be seen in the take up of independent visitors and the use of advocacy. Over 60 children now have an independent visitor, with 40 new independent visitors recruited

in 2018, compared to 15 in 2017. A small number of children are still waiting for an independent visitor and work needs to continue to develop this service further. The take up of the advocacy service has more than doubled in recent months, with 55 children supported between January and June 2018.

Improvements to the audit process are assisting senior managers in their oversight of the experiences of children in Croydon. However, senior managers are aware that the audit and quality assurance processes, including performance information, need to be strengthened further. A clear understanding of priorities is assisting with the work being undertaken, which includes a targeted improvement plan for the current year, alongside some external reviews of specific services, such as the fostering service.

In summary, progress has been made, but this is not yet having the required outcome and impact for all children in care.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Louise Hocking
Her Majesty's Inspector