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Dear David

Focused visit to Southwark local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Southwark local authority children's services on 15 and 16 January 2019. The inspectors were Andy Whippey, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Maire Atherton, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in care, including disabled children. They looked at a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers and managers. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information, and children's case records. In addition, they evaluated the effectiveness of supervision and support for social work staff.

Overview

Children in care in Southwark receive effective support that helps many of them to achieve good outcomes. Since the last inspection in 2017, senior managers have made evident progress in addressing the areas for improvement identified at that time, underpinned by a culture of continuous learning. They have a good understanding of the areas where improvements are still required, and they continue to show drive and determination in sustaining and improving outcomes for children in care.

The quality of permanence planning, particularly for children in foster care, is improving, although the improvements are not yet sufficiently embedded in social work practice. This has resulted in delays in achieving permanence for a small minority of children. High-quality, child-centred practice ensures that children are able to contribute to and engage in planning for their future. Skilled workers are persistent in building and maintaining good relationships with children in care. Senior managers have developed a comprehensive suite of performance data to support their work in improving outcomes for children in care. Leaders and managers use this data well to inform service planning and delivery.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The quality and timeliness of permanence planning.
- The quality and consistency of recording, including of visits to children, supervision, and activity by independent reviewing officers (IROs).
- The clarity of action planning in care plans.

Findings

- The access to resources team, which has been created since the last inspection, is having a positive impact on ensuring a more vigorous approach to identifying placements for children. More recent placements demonstrate better matching between children's identified needs and the capacity of carers to meet those needs. The quality of referral information for children who need placements has also improved, better reflecting children's unique needs and personalities, and enabling more appropriate matches to be made.
- Progress has been made since the last inspection in ensuring that permanence is routinely considered when planning for children, but there is still further work to do. The recent introduction of permanence trackers and panels is a positive development. However, panel records do not always sufficiently identify clear and specific actions to achieve timely permanence. Some children have been successfully placed with carers for a long period of time, but formal matching decisions have yet to be made. The frequency and structure of permanence planning meetings are not sufficiently explicit.

- Senior managers have been effective in increasing the numbers of children who are placed within Southwark or within 20 miles of their home. When children are placed at some distance from their families, a clear rationale is included in case records. For the majority of these children, their needs are met well in their placements, with appropriate arrangements for their health and education. Inspectors saw several cases where risks to children had been reduced successfully by placing children away from the local area while ensuring that children were able to maintain contact with their families and communities.

- Senior managers have a strong commitment to maintaining and sustaining contact for children. Arrangements for children to have contact with their families and other people who are important to them are very well considered and promoted. Contact arrangements for children are clearly identified and articulated in plans, and they are reviewed regularly.

- Social workers undertake purposeful work with children, and most children in foster care are benefiting from sensitive work to help them to understand their life histories. Life-story books that were seen by inspectors were of good quality.

- Children's wishes and feelings are captured well in assessments, plans and meetings. Social workers know their children very well and talk about them with genuine warmth and care. They visit them regularly, almost always within the local authority's expected timescales, and they see them alone, when appropriate. Visits to children and their views and feelings are mostly well recorded. However, there is some variability in terms of the depth, quality and content of records. In some cases, there is no analysis of the visit that would help to inform any future planning for children, or a record of actions resulting from such visits.

- IROs are having an increasing impact on improving the quality of practice and of reviews, although not all of their interventions on behalf of children are recorded well.

- The physical and emotional needs of children in care are clearly identified and understood, and practice has improved since the last inspection. Health professionals are proactive and determined in ensuring that the health needs of children in care are met. Close working relationships and effective communication between health professionals and social workers are helping to ensure that children's needs are addressed holistically, whether children live within the borough or at a distance.

- The needs of disabled children are well considered in most cases. Short breaks and transitions to adult services are managed well by a team that supports young people up to the age of 25. Good consideration is given to finding the right placement for each child. Most placement plans seen by inspectors were

thorough and detailed. Contact with family members is sensitively managed, and children's wishes and feelings are taken into account.

- Reviews of plans for children in care are mostly held within statutory timescales and are brought forward if there is a change in children's circumstances. Children are encouraged to take part in their reviews, and most do so, with their wishes and feelings being well recorded. Care plans contain clear descriptions of children's needs. However, the plans are not always sufficiently specific or detailed with regard to the actions required to ensure children's well-being. This means that professionals, children and their families are not always clear that actions are being taken or that progress is being made.
- When the plan is for children to return home, any risks to such arrangements are well understood and appropriate action is taken to reduce those risks. Plans proceed at a pace consistent with the child's needs. They are well considered and provide sufficient safeguards and support for children and their families.
- Risks relating to children in care who are at risk of sexual exploitation and going missing are mostly very well identified and managed, although risk minimisation plans are not consistently evident on case files. Links between missing episodes and the potential risks of sexual and other forms of exploitation are appropriately considered. Risk assessments are completed and most are reviewed when risks escalate or decrease. Strategy meetings are held when appropriate to coordinate multi-agency responses and actions, and they demonstrate good partnership engagement; risks are identified well.
- Senior managers have strengthened the response to children in care who have been missing. A weekly 'missing' meeting ensures senior management oversight, although the actions to protect children agreed at such meetings are not always sufficiently clear. The very recent introduction of a specific worker to undertake return home interviews with children in care is helping to improve the previously variable quality of return home interviews. Recent examples of such interviews seen by inspectors were of good quality and added real value in understanding why young people had been missing; this is helping to inform future safety planning.
- The recording of management oversight of casework is not sufficiently robust. Staff told inspectors that they feel valued and supported by visible, supportive and accessible managers, although records show variability in the quality of supervision. Supervision is frequent and records show that children's circumstances are discussed, although, in some records, there is little evidence of analysis and a lack of clarity as to the actions needed to help to improve outcomes for children in care.
- Case audits seen by inspectors did not show sufficient consideration of the lived experience of children in care or of the impact of the work undertaken. In some

audits, there was a lack of clarity as to the actions required, which was a missed opportunity to identify what needed to be done to improve practice.

- Staff have access to a wide range of induction and training courses. They report that they are supported and encouraged to engage in training and development, and these events provide good opportunities to reflect and focus on practice improvement with children in care. Caseloads are manageable, and this enables workers to undertake effective direct work with children and young people. Social workers in their assessed and supported year in employment told inspectors that they felt very well supported and well prepared for the future, and that their work, while protected, ensured that they had good exposure to the reality of practice.

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

Yours sincerely

Andy Whippey
Her Majesty's Inspector