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Mr Tony Oakman
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Dear Mr Oakman

Monitoring visit of Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Dudley children's services on 5 and 6 June 2017. This was the third monitoring visit since the local authority was judged to be inadequate in April 2016. The visit was carried out by Jenny Turnross and Pauline Higham, Her Majesty's Inspectors.

The local authority continues to make positive progress in improving services for children and young people.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in the area of children looked after, with a particular focus on achieving permanence. Additionally, inspectors reviewed the quality of social work practice in the assessment service, the care management service and the children in care service. The progress of the local authority was reviewed against the authority's improvement plan targets to assess the distance travelled.

The visit considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, supervision records and observation of social workers and team managers. Inspectors also spoke to parents, foster carers, independent reviewing officers and senior managers.

Overview

Senior leaders, elected members and partners continue to support the much-needed improvements. The implementation of the local authority's improvement plan is resulting in positive progress. Social work practice continues to improve and this means that more children, particularly those who have recently become looked after, receive an improved service. Children have not historically achieved permanence in a

timely way. Consequently, a small number of children continue to experience drift and delay. Workforce stability continues to be a challenge as there is still a high, albeit reducing, number of temporary social work staff. This instability means that some children do not benefit from enduring relationships with their social workers. In a small number of cases, there is an absence of timely management decisions being made by team managers. This reduces the effectiveness of planning for a small number of children.

The local authority is working hard to create a positive learning culture. The mandatory back-to-basics training continues to support practice improvements. Quality assurance activity is starting to influence practice learning. The weekly senior manager briefings are contributing to a positive working environment. The local authority does not always have an effective overview of practice, as access to reliable electronic performance information is not always accurate. The pace of change continues to be swift in some areas of practice. The local authority knows that there is still much to do to ensure that all children in Dudley receive consistent help and support.

Findings and evaluation of progress

The threshold for bringing children into care is appropriate; this is an improvement since the inspection. Once children become looked after, social workers understand the need to progress their plans without delay. Social workers and managers understand the importance of securing early permanence for children and this is resulting in improved outcomes for an increasing number of children. Most team managers have sufficient oversight of children's situations to ensure that cases make the required progress. Additionally, the weekly children looked after meeting seeks to challenge any gaps and potential delays. The development of a number of electronic tracking systems is supporting management oversight. The potential of the system is limited by the accuracy of the electronic recording system and currently the authority is not consistently capturing the correct information. This, at times, contributes to further delay in planning for a small number of children.

Social work practice continues to improve. This means that more children, particularly those who have recently become looked after, receive a better service. Social workers demonstrate an increased commitment to seeking the wishes and feelings of children through direct work. Children are seen regularly and their views are better understood. As a result, their plans are more reflective of their needs. A number of panels, which are chaired by senior managers, support and monitor case progression. Permanence planning meetings are held to agree long-term plans. As yet, an evidence-based model of practice is not being consistently used by social workers, although there are plans in place to develop this. The local authority acknowledges that a consistent approach to practice will support multi-agency partners to help children more effectively.

Where appropriate, social workers successfully identify family and friends carers for children. Viability assessments of family members and friends are of an acceptable standard and most are timely. However, social workers are confused about the procedure for the immediate placement of children with their family or friends as connected carers. Some placements begin without the approval of a senior manager and this means that the local authority cannot be assured that placements are appropriate. Furthermore, family and friends carers do not always receive appropriate support and guidance from the fostering service, leaving new carers with a number of important unmet needs.

There has been a significant improvement in the impact of the work of the independent reviewing officers (IROs). They now offer appropriate support and challenge to social workers, team managers and senior managers. This is a consequence of their significantly reduced caseloads. Furthermore, social work caseloads have also reduced to a manageable level. As a result, social workers and IROs spend more time with children. Issues raised by IROs are responded to appropriately by social workers and team managers; this is resulting in improved outcomes for children. More can be done to ensure that IROs have an overview of practice through their use of performance information. This knowledge will assist IROs to contribute to overall improvements in social work practice.

The local authority works hard to seek the views of children when considering their long-term placement needs. For example, children write to the fostering panel and, in some instances, children attend the panel to ensure that their views are heard. The local authority is taking action to address previous delays by matching children permanently and appropriately to their short-term foster carers. This enables children to experience the psychological benefits of a permanent placement. Currently, the local authority does not have a sufficient numbers of adopters who are approved as foster carers. This limits the opportunities for babies to secure early attachments to their adopters. More needs to be done to support children to achieve permanence through 'foster to adopt' arrangements.

There is a shared and determined commitment to improving services for children in Dudley. Social workers and managers are very proud of their work. They speak highly of the vision of senior managers, who have established a culture of positivity and, most importantly, a culture of 'can do and will do', in which the needs of children are paramount. The local authority knows that further improvement must be made to ensure that all children receive consistent and timely support. It is systematically and diligently addressing the actions in the improvement plan and this work is beginning to make a positive difference to children.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you and your staff for your positive engagement with the programme of monitoring visits. I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Jenny Turnross
Her Majesty's Inspector