

13 June 2017

Mr Paul Marshall
Director of Children's Services
Room 218
PO BOX 532
Town Hall
Manchester
M60 2AF

Dear Mr Marshall

Monitoring visit of Manchester City Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Manchester City Council children's services on 7 and 8 March 2017. The visit was the third monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in June 2014. The inspectors were Shabana Abasi OI and Andy Whippey HMI.

The monitoring visit focused on the performance of the adoption service. Inspectors found that the local authority has made progress in improving adoption services for its children and young people. Many of the practice changes leading to reducing delays for children have been driven by improvements in the past six to eight months.

Areas covered by the visit

The visit considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, supervision records and performance data. In addition, we spoke to a range of staff including social workers, team and senior managers, senior leaders and the chair of the adoption panel. Inspectors attended a number of meetings, including an adoption tracking meeting, an adoption team meeting and a meeting with a group of adopters.

Overview

The authority's adoption service is showing signs of positive changes, as seen by inspectors on this visit. This is a result of an accelerated programme of improvements in the past six to eight months. The local authority acknowledges that, while positive progress has been made, there is more work to do to ensure that adoption services are consistently good for all children. It has a comprehensive action plan in place that is being implemented across the service to achieve this.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Based on the evidence gathered during the visit, we identified areas of strength, areas where improvement is occurring, and areas that require more focus and development.

Delays for children awaiting adoption are reducing. Recent unpublished and invalidated data (January 2017) collated by the authority indicates an improving trajectory in the timeliness of adoption performance. The time taken from a child being received into care to being placed for adoption has reduced from 740 days in 2013/14 to 514 days. Although improving, this is still 88 days above the government threshold. Timely conclusion to care proceedings and the introduction of robust monitoring and tracking processes are reducing delay. The establishment of an adoption tracker, fortnightly adoption tracking meetings and attendance of the adoption service manager at the legal gateway meetings have enabled robust and regular monitoring of cases by managers and senior managers. Consequently, there is more timely identification of permanence options and placements for children.

Family finding is now better supported, with a dedicated family-finding service. The adoption service has been restructured and now consists of two teams: recruitment and assessment, and a family-finding team. This structure means that social workers do not have to balance the competing demands of each role. This has resulted in focused and robust family finding. The local authority operates non-sequential family finding, which supports timely matching. Inspectors saw evidence of timely identification of in-house placements and, when an in-house placement was not immediately identified, searches commenced with the regional consortium and Adoption Link. Family-finding activities such as exchange days are used to identify adoptive placements for children.

The authority is working to ensure that all children who would benefit from adoption are placed successfully. The report of adoption outcomes for difficult-to-place children, completed by the head of service in February 2017, evidences the progress made in relation to the number and timeliness of children adopted from these groups. Data for January 2017 indicates that, of the 59 children adopted, 41% were of Black ethnic minority origin, 39% were part of a brother and sister group, 20% were aged five or over and 8.5% had a disability. As a result of this focus, the timeliness for adopted Black ethnic minority children is better than for all children adopted in Manchester.

There has been a concerted effort to improve the number of adopters, and 25 adopters have been approved so far in 2016/17, with another 10 families at stage 1 and 15 families at stage 2. Nine of the 25 approved adopters are from a Black or ethnic minority background. The authority recognises that it needs to recruit adopters to reflect and match the needs of all children whose permanence plan is adoption. Recruitment is targeted on pilot areas, with attendance at ward meetings and local community events, in an attempt to increase adopters for difficult-to-place children. Effective and timely use of the adoption psychology service provides therapeutic input for children and advice to adopters. This is ensuring that

placements are well supported. Examples were also seen by inspectors of support being identified and work being undertaken with children prior to placements beginning, to help to support their understanding and their transition.

Adoptive placements for brothers and sisters together are now considered within reasonable timescales. This is particularly evident in more recent casework. Where the decision is not to place together, this is informed by brother and sister assessments or psychological assessments. When recommendations are made to separate brothers and sisters, there is a very clear rationale. Permanency decisions seen by inspectors were made in the best interests of each child. Inspectors saw appropriate consideration of contact between brothers and sisters who were in separate placements, ensuring that relationships and identity are supported.

The local authority is promoting fostering to adopt. There were 11 foster-to-adopt placements made in 2015/16 and seven in this financial year. In two cases seen by inspectors, decision making was timely and appropriate, with good pre-birth assessment and planning resulting in placement from hospital and progression to adoption in a timely way.

Looked after children reviews seen were timely, with regular attendance by social workers and minutes that evidenced clear recording of discussions, actions and timescales. Case sampling evidenced independent reviewing officers' involvement in the case, with appropriate challenge and escalation when required. Social workers spoken to see children regularly, have a real sense of the child and were able to verbalise the child's wishes and feelings. However, the voice of the child is not always evident in written records. While inspectors saw some good examples of direct work with children, practice remains variable.

The adoption panel chair is experienced. The panel is made up of representatives who have relevant professional experience of adoption. The level of debate, questioning and decision making from the panel is appropriate, with well-considered matching. Minutes of meetings evidence increasing challenge by the panel on the quality of assessments. The panel chair provides quarterly reports on the quality of assessments.

The quality of prospective adopters reports is improving, but the quality of child permanence reports requires further work. Social workers have received training on completing quality of prospective adopters reports, and quality assurance by the adoption panel is evidencing improvement. The quality of child permanence reports remains too variable, with examples seen ranging from outstanding to inadequate. The reports are not consistently updated to reflect changes in the child's development and/or circumstances to ensure that all of the child's experiences are captured. The local authority has identified this as an area of improvement, and is commissioning training for managers and social workers.

Life-story work, life-story books and later-life letters are not sufficiently prioritised. As a result, there are delays in this essential work being completed with children.

Children move in with their adoptive families without full information to assist and support adoptive families' understanding of the child's life history and experiences.

Adoption support is improving, but adoption support assessments and plans are not yet of good quality. There are increasing numbers of children and families receiving adoption support. There is increasing use of the adoption support fund, and 55 applications have been approved in this financial year. Adoption support assessments do not routinely include conversations with children to gain a better understanding of their views to inform adoption support planning. Adoption support plans seen by inspectors evidenced a good level of detail and consideration of support needs. However, plans are not always SMART or clear about the success criteria.

Inspectors identified via case records and from adopters' feedback that there is a need for more clarity around the financial support packages to foster carers wishing to become special guardians and the duration of the adoption support allowances. Appropriately assessed financial support packages are essential to support placements and can influence foster carers' decisions on becoming special guardians.

To support continued improvement, managerial oversight of casework needs to be strengthened. Supervision is not consistently regular and is variable in quality. Examples were seen of good, well-recorded, reflective and child-centred supervision. However, in other cases, recording was minimal and challenge to deficits in practice was absent or ineffective.

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

Yours sincerely

Shabana Abasi
Her Majesty's Inspector