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Ms Judith Ramsden
Corporate Director, Children's Services
Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council
Town Hall
Bourne Avenue
Bournemouth
BH2 6DY

Dear Ms Ramsden

Focused visit to Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Children's Services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (BCP) children's services on 5 and 6 November 2019. The inspectors were Diane Partridge and Julie Knight, Her Majesty's Inspectors.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for planning and achieving permanence for children in care. Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers, team managers, social care support practitioners and independent reviewing officers. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.

Overview

The councils previously serving the boroughs of Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole have been replaced by one new council known as Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council. A new corporate director of children's services (DCS) came into post when the council came into being on 1 April 2019. The senior leadership team has taken timely and effective measures to understand the experiences of children in care of the new council.

Senior leaders have found that not enough children have a timely, well-considered plan for permanence or have the security of being long-term matched to their forever home. Managers are not rigorous enough in providing direction to ensure that children's plans are progressed quickly enough. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) do not challenge the lack of pace in making important decisions for children.

Consequently, children experience drift and delay in achieving their permanence plans.

The senior leadership team is rightly embarking on a programme of integration and transformation. The DCS is unstinting in her efforts to engage political leaders and partners to become good corporate parents and grandparents. One example is her early action to ensure that all children in care have laptops. Purposeful work by the Children in Care Council is ensuring that children's experiences inform wider strategic planning.

Senior leaders are aware of the strengths and areas for development and have realistic plans to achieve the necessary improvements. Many initiatives, such as increased management oversight, investment in a case progression officer and 'whole service' training on permanence, are in place now, but it is too soon to see any positive impact on children.

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

- Permanence planning for children, including the use of parallel planning so that they achieve permanence at a time that is right for them.
- The quality of care plans so that they reflect children's current needs and circumstances and are informed by up-to-date, comprehensive needs assessments.
- The effectiveness of management oversight that ensures timely permanence for children.
- Scrutiny of permanence planning by independent reviewing officers so that children have timely and well-considered plans for permanence that progress.
- The range and choice of placements to meet children's needs and support permanency planning.

Findings

- For a significant number of children, important decisions about long-term arrangements when they cannot remain at home take too long. Early permanence planning, including parallel planning for adoption, is not sufficiently well considered. Although most children live in stable homes, shortfalls in management oversight lead to delay in achieving permanence.
- Most children benefit from trusting relationships with social workers. Social workers visit regularly and spend quality time with children. They are persistent and creative in how they engage with children. This helps children to share their

wishes and feelings. Social workers know children really well and can articulate what is important to them.

- Life-story work is a strength in Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole. It is not seen as a 'one-off' piece of work but continues throughout children's lives. Written 'books' are of a very high quality, and are tailored to the needs of individual brothers and sisters. Most children are well supported to understand what is happening and why they are in care.
- The quality of assessments and effectiveness of care planning for permanence is inconsistent. Children's assessments and care plans do not comprehensively address their needs and experiences. They are not routinely updated in response to significant changes in children's circumstances. Options for permanence are not consistently considered. Too often, the child's plan or contingency arrangements are not sufficiently clear. This lack of clarity results in some children experiencing delay in achieving the security and stability they need.
- Extended family members are considered as potential carers for children who cannot live at home. Viability assessments vary in quality and are not always undertaken at the early stages of planning or in parallel with other plans. This contributes to the delay experienced by some children.
- Special guardianship and connected carers assessments are of a good quality. The rationale for recommendations and decisions is well explained so that family members understand them.
- Independent reviewing officers rarely challenge when permanence plans for children are not presented to the second review. Dispute resolution processes are not used effectively to bring traction to children's plans in order to help them to achieve permanence. Consequently, some children experience unnecessary delay. Nevertheless, the vast majority of children's reviews are held in a timely way. They are well attended by important people in children's lives and are consistent in capturing children's views.
- Most children in care are safe where they live and are living in their forever home. However, not all children are long-term matched with their carers. These children do not have certainty about their future. They do not benefit from the sense of belonging and stability afforded by a secure placement.
- There is not yet a sufficiently wide choice of placements to meet children's needs. This means that not all children are well matched to their carers, and a few children move out of area, causing disruption to their education and access to health services. Senior leaders are rightly concerned about long-term stability of placements, which, at 63%, is below comparators. The new sufficiency strategy appropriately analyses current demand and predicts likely future demand. Leaders are clear about what needs to happen. They have realistic action plans in place to address shortfalls.

- Foster carers are well supported through an extensive training offer and a broad range of monthly support groups. The resilience fostering scheme is equipping a small number of carers to offer permanent homes to children with highly complex needs and challenging behaviour. Children who have experienced instability are benefiting from this approach.
- Family time is well considered, appropriately risk assessed and informed by what children want. It is arranged flexibly so that it is meaningful and promotes positive relationships for children with their family, as well as others who are important to them.
- Supervision with social workers takes place regularly. Social workers talk positively about supervision and the support they receive from their managers. However, supervision records fail to demonstrate that permanence planning for children is at the forefront of discussions, or that permanence options have been carefully considered. Management oversight and supervision is therefore not driving progress with pace to achieve security and stability for children.
- Senior leaders are well aware of the issues identified by inspectors through their own audits, externally commissioned audits and data analysis. They demonstrate that they have well-thought-out and realistic actions to make the necessary improvements, for example acting promptly to create a new fostering panel that will focus on long-term matching arrangements, the creation of new permanence policies so that expectations are clear, and a new supervision policy and approach. However, it is too soon to see the impact of these for children now.

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

Yours sincerely

Diane Partridge
Her Majesty's Inspector