

Children's Services Scrutiny Committee

Meeting to be held on Wednesday 15th January 2020

Electoral Division affected: (All Divisions);
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Permanence – Ofsted Focused Visit

(Appendix 'A' refers)

Contact for further information:

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Executive Summary

On the 4 November 2019, Ofsted undertook a two day focused visit to determine if Lancashire had improved their permanence offer to children and young people. This was not a graded visit but they provided an overview of the direction of travel on the four recommendations made in 2018.

The outcome of the inspection was that Lancashire has enhanced both the provision and the systems to ensure permanence is seen as a priority for Looked after Children. There is further work to be undertaken but they could see that across the workforce, improvements have taken place.

Recommendation

The Children's Services Scrutiny Committee is asked that:

- i. The improvements detailed in the report be noted.
- ii. Review and support of the service is continued to ensure that all children and young people cared for by the county council are provided with highest level of care and support.
- iii. The four areas for improvement identified in the Ofsted letter be noted and the Committee seek assurances on the improvements.

Background and Advice

Lancashire Children's Services were re -inspected by Ofsted in June 2018, the outcome of the inspection was the organisation Requires Improvement to be Good. This was progress on the 2015 inspection that had graded Lancashire as Inadequate.

Eleven recommendations were made to support Lancashire achieve a Good rating at future inspections. Of those, four recommendations that identified areas which required improvement were directly related to the permanence of children in the care of the local authority:

- Ensure that all plans for children in need, children subject to child protection plans, looked after children and care leavers are specific, measurable and outcome-focused, so that parents, young people and professionals know who needs to do what, and by when.
- Ensure that the quality of critical challenge provided by first line managers, Independent Reviewing Officers (IRO) in looked after reviews and conference chairs within child protection conferences are effective in avoiding drift or delay.
- Ensure that permanence planning, including for those children who return home, is rigorously monitored and reviewed on a consistent basis across the county to reduce the likelihood of drift and delay.
- Ensure that when children successfully return home, timely revocation hearings are held to secure permanence plans for them to remain in the care of their parents.

Many children who come into care return home to live with their parents. However, for those children where this is not an option there are a number of possibilities. No one choice is more desirable than any other. The decision should be made on the needs of the child and not the resource available. The options are:

- Adoption
- Long Term Fostering
- Family and Friends Foster Care
- Special Guardianship Orders
- Child Arrangement Orders
- Residential Care

Two experienced consultants with knowledge of permanence were hired to assist the leadership team and workforce to undertake the work highlighted in the inspection report. There was a full county plan produced that included workforce development, commissioning and legal.

A permanency policy was produced in collaboration with social workers and managers. To support the policy, a permanence tracker and permanence planning meeting was established. These were led by the Heads of Service from the three localities. The purpose was to make sure that management had a clear line of sight of all children who should have a plan of permanence. The Heads of Service have driven the need for children to have a plan of permanency and have ensured they continue to chair the permanency meetings.

All children by their second Looked after Child review (chaired by an IRO) should have a clear plan of permanence noted on the child's file. A great deal of emphasis was placed on IRO's to challenge practitioners when the plan was not on the file or not of a good enough quality. An escalation policy was introduced to make certain that managers were aware that there was a need to follow up on the need to ascertain the plan for the child. This is now placed on the child's file so that there is an audit trail of the escalation. This work was acknowledged in the focus visit, but further work needs to be undertaken where at third and fourth review the plan has not been executed.

Training has been provided by the principal social worker to ensure that assessments were clearly identifying the plan for permanence. Practitioners were supported to understand that there are three issues that must be considered when making a decision regarding permanency; is the placement emotionally warm, physically safe and legally correct? This is tested by the quality assurance team when auditing cases. Where the principals of permanency are not evidenced this is highlighted to a manager to discuss with the social worker and ensure the information is on the child's file and evident within all reports.

Work was undertaken to revoke care orders of children who had been at home where there had been no safeguarding concerns. Although a great deal of work was undertaken and initially a large number of orders were discharged, this has not continued at the rate we would have anticipated. There continues to be a large number of children at home on care orders and children who become subject to a care order at home following the completion of proceedings. There is a need to review this work making sure that families are not subject to intervention when it is not necessary or proportionate.

On the 4 November 2019, Ofsted undertook a 2 day focus visit on permanency. This was not a graded inspection but did provide the county council with an overview of the four areas identified in the 2018 inspection. Feedback was provided on the 5 November. The inspectors fed back that children in Lancashire were safe and it was evident to them the amount of work and commitment that had been undertaken over the last year. They highlighted that the voice of the child was evident in cases, audits allowed change to take place, and that they were thorough and balanced. They highlighted that social workers knew their children well and spoke with confidence, assessments were updated regularly, permanence plans were available at second review and that there was evidence of regular case and group supervision and they noted good access to training and development.

They were clear there was more to do, assessment quality and timeliness continues to be variable, although permanence plans at second review were on the file, where this had not been actioned at the third review there was no evidence of the IRO following this up. They highlighted that there continues to be drift and delay in both revocation and in proceedings that lead to children waiting too long to know where they will be living in the future.

The focus visit confirmed what we were aware of and did not highlight areas that we are not already working on and making change to.

The areas for improvement will be added to the existing Getting to Good plan, which is reviewed by a multi-agency group chaired by the Executive Director and will support the full inspection.

The actions will be monitored and reported back into the Ofsted preparation meeting that is held on a regular basis to make sure we are continuing to understand the importance of permanency for every child to make sure they understand what the plans are for their future and providing them and their families the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to their future plans.

Consultations

N/A

Implications:

Should the recommendations of the Ofsted visit not be implemented it is unlikely the next full inspection will award a good or outstanding judgement.

Risk management

The risk is overseen in several forums, the main driver is the Getting to Good group that has a comprehensive plan overseen by the Executive Director and partners from across the county. There is a LGA representative that supports the group ensuring independent scrutiny of the work and feeding back to the Department for Education.

Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985

List of Background Papers

Paper	Date	Contact/Tel
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Reason for inclusion in Part II, if appropriate

NA