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Dear Ms Colbert

Monitoring visit of Sunderland children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Sunderland local authority children's services on 15 and 16 January 2019. This visit was carried out by Her Majesty's Inspectors, Neil Penswick and Peter McEntee.

The visit was the first monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate for overall effectiveness for a second time in July 2018. Following the previous inspection in July 2015, Sunderland city council set up Together for Children (TfC) to deliver children's services functions on behalf of the council. Since the inspection in July 2018, a new chief executive and director for TfC have been in post.

Due to a technical fault, the electronic case recording system was unavailable on the second day of this visit. This resulted in the inspectors being unable to scrutinise all the areas that had been agreed. On the areas inspectors were able to look at, progress in improving services has been limited. Better decision-making systems have been developed and workforce stability is improved, but this has yet to sufficiently impact on the inconsistency in the quality of social work practice.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in response to requests for social work support for vulnerable children. In particular, they reviewed whether risks to children are identified and whether thresholds to children's services are applied appropriately. Inspectors also considered whether actions taken are compliant with locally agreed timescales.

A range of evidence was considered during the visit, including electronic case records, performance management data and quality assurance reports. In addition, inspectors spoke to a range of staff, including managers, social workers and other practitioners.

Overview

Since the last inspection, TfC has made steady progress in the recruitment of a permanent workforce. Systems have been developed to monitor and improve the effectiveness of support to vulnerable families.

The quality of the immediate social work response to children and families when requests are made for support remains inconsistent. A lack of understanding by partner agencies of the thresholds for access to children's services continues. Too many children's cases are referred which do not meet the criteria for statutory involvement. This results in social workers spending too much time trying to gather information where families do not need this level of support.

The timeliness of the response to requests for support is good. However, on many cases the response by social workers is not sufficiently thorough. A lack of consideration of previous social work involvement and a failure to check essential information with other agencies and with parents results in some children not having their needs met in a timely manner. The quality of recording does not always enable an understanding of the issues and work undertaken. Management oversight does not address these weaknesses in practice well enough.

Inspectors did not see any children at risk of significant harm who were not receiving services on this visit.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Since the last inspection, TfC and Sunderland City Council have produced a learning and improvement plan. The plan comprehensively addresses the recommendations from the Ofsted inspection. It includes specific actions and measurable timescales and outcomes. Work is underway to deliver the necessary changes. However, this has yet to deliver the improvements needed in the quality of the immediate response to support for vulnerable families.

Agencies' understanding of thresholds to access children's social care is not yet embedded. TfC have worked with partner agencies and the Sunderland

Safeguarding Children Board to revise the threshold document. This identifies what support should be available to children with additional needs, and from whom, across the city. A multi-agency training programme has commenced. However, inspectors still found many cases where other agencies had contacted TfC and where there was a lack of clarity about what they were concerned about and about their expectations of the social work response. Many of these cases did not meet the threshold for children's services involvement. Far too much time is being spent by social workers from the specialist Integrated Contact and Referral Team (ICRT) unnecessarily checking poorly presented information from other agencies.

The consideration of the high number of 'child concern notifications' from the Northumbria police is effective. A new triage system has been established. A social work manager, police officer and domestic abuse and early help workers effectively evaluate the thresholds for involvement and consider the required actions. This assists in ensuring that there is a timely response for children. However, some of the notifications from the police lack essential information. They do not detail the concerns needed to support an effective evaluation of risk and need. While some cases had been appropriately considered for stepping down, inspectors found that when further issues were identified, these cases were not always referred back to ICRT for review, potentially leaving children's needs unmet.

TfC have been monitoring and improving their response time to contacts, and this has resulted in almost all now being concluded within 24 hours. While this is a timelier response, inspectors found that it has resulted in some children's cases being closed prematurely. Not all essential information had been gathered to facilitate robust decision-making. There was a lack of analysis by social workers of historical factors. This included cases involving domestic abuse and parental substance misuse and had resulted in repeat requests for social work assistance as the issues had not been identified and support services had not been provided at the first contact.

Inspectors saw some good examples of social work recording. However, in the main, recording does not detail what the social worker has done, what information has been acquired or the rationale for why decisions are made. This does not support accountability and good decision-making on children's cases.

Management oversight has not sufficiently addressed the weaknesses in social work practice. In conversation with inspectors, managers demonstrated a good knowledge of the work needed. Management sign-off is evident on all the children's cases. However, deficits in the work undertaken and in the recording of this had not been consistently identified by the managers.

Inspectors also looked at re-referrals. These occur when a child's case is closed to children's services and then further concerns arise. In some cases, previous assessments had not identified core issues, and, as a result, these had not been tackled. This resulted in children's needs not being addressed. A high proportion of re-referral is due to parents repeatedly refusing to work with children's services. TfC do not have a full understanding of why there is a high number of parents declining

supportive services. Following this being raised by inspectors, senior managers are considering how to best to address these issues.

Quality assurance processes are under developed and are not yet contributing to an effective understanding of all the areas requiring improvement. This includes addressing some of the shortfalls identified on this visit, such as the high number of contacts resulting in no further action and the increasing number of re-referrals. A new quality assurance framework is currently being developed and it is planned that this will be implemented by May 2019.

Social workers who met inspectors reported improved management oversight since the last inspection. As a result, they now felt better supported to deliver good-quality children's social work.

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

Yours sincerely

Neil Penswick
Her Majesty's Inspector

CC Patrick Melia, Chief Executive, Sunderland City Council