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Mr Alex Hopkins
Director of Children's Services and Chief Executive (Together for Children)
Civic Centre
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Dear Mr Hopkins

Monitoring visit of Sunderland children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Sunderland which took place on 14 and 15 June 2017. As a result of the inadequate inspection judgement in June 2015, Sunderland City Council set up Together for Children (TfC), a company owned by the council to deliver on its behalf children's services, including early help, social care and education services for children. These arrangements took effect from 1 April 2017.

This was the fourth monitoring visit since Sunderland City Council was judged inadequate for services to children who need help and protection. Overall, TfC is making sustained progress in its improvement of services to children and families. The visit was carried out by Fiona Millns and Mary Candlin, Ofsted Inspectors, and Parveen Hussain, Social Care Regulatory Inspection Manager.

Areas covered by the visit

During this visit, inspectors reviewed the leadership, management and governance arrangements of the newly formed company and its impact on ensuring improvement, effective strategies and good-quality services for children. Inspectors focused on:

- Arrangements to comply with statutory guidance and establish effective governance and strategic planning.
- The effectiveness of partnership working with other strategic bodies to identify, promote and secure services that meet local need.
- The effectiveness of scrutiny and corporate parenting.

- The effectiveness of performance monitoring, including the work of independent reviewing officers (IROs), in ensuring a strong focus on areas for development.
- The quality of management oversight, staff supervision and scrutiny in improving the quality of decision making, appropriate challenge and the provision of help to children and young people.
- Arrangements to ensure a sufficient, stable, suitably qualified and competent workforce.

The visit considered a range of evidence, including scrutiny of children's records and interviews with social workers and managers. Inspectors also spoke to senior managers, elected members, the chief executive of Sunderland City Council, the chair of the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB), the chair of the improvement board and the chair of TfC. Inspectors also met with performance management and quality assurance managers, and scrutinised a wide range of data, audits and documentation.

Overview

There is a clear vision in Sunderland for the delivery of children's services through the recently established company, TfC.

The new arrangements are supported by strong governance and backing from the local authority and partners. Performance management and quality assurance processes are increasingly effective in driving improvement in services, and there has been sustained progress.

The quality of social work practice, the high level of re-referrals, and the fragility of recruitment and workforce stability remain key challenges for TfC in driving forward the improvement agenda.

Findings and evaluation of progress

The self-assessment provided by TfC as part of this monitoring visit appropriately identifies the key areas for improvement and the areas for further development. The assessment recognises, and inspectors agree, that there is still a great deal to do to drive up standards and embed the improvements made in practice, and to ensure a solid, stable, suitably experienced and competent workforce. TfC recognises that these are critical to ensure that all children have timely, well-assessed interventions to meet their needs.

TfC is underpinned by clear governance and management arrangements. All senior management positions within the new company are held by experienced strategic officers from diverse backgrounds, and a new permanent chair has been recently appointed to the LSCB.

The chief executive of the council is highly experienced and is actively driving forward managerial leadership, working closely with the political leadership of the

council to improve performance in the quality of practice and outcomes for children. To support this, the chief executive has ensured that all 75 elected members understand the new model of delivery of children's services. The chief executive runs regular performance clinics to scrutinise performance and hold officers to account.

There is good evidence of sign-up to the new arrangements under TfC across the strategic partnership. The recently appointed chair of TfC has clear plans to ensure effective communication across strategic boards, including the improvement board, the TfC board, Sunderland City Council and the LSCB. To promote good communication and the effectiveness of TfC further, the chair attends both the improvement board and LSCB. However, these changes are very recent and it is too soon to see any impact at an operational level. The role of the improvement board in providing continuity and sustained challenge during this period of transition is central until the new company, with the LSCB, embeds its roles in relation to monitoring and challenge for the improvement of services for children.

Since the last inspection in June 2015, the LSCB has been restructured, a new permanent chair has recently been appointed, and the membership of the board has been streamlined to improve its responsiveness and effectiveness. It is too soon to see the impact of these arrangements. Performance meetings are in place for partners to challenge and ensure a focus on key areas for improvement.

The local authority arrangements for scrutiny have been strengthened, and they demonstrate appropriate challenge by elected members. The scrutiny board routinely receives performance data, is robust in its challenge of officers in respect of progress and focuses well on outcomes for children.

The lead member is committed to improving services for children and demonstrates effective challenge, both personally and through the corporate parenting board. She has had training and mentoring to support her role and ensure a robust focus on children. This is demonstrated through, for example, initiating changes to protocols for monitoring school placement moves for children looked after, involvement in regulation 44 visits to children's homes, and the provision of additional information and technology equipment to social work teams.

Performance information and reports provided to the improvement board and the LSCB support effective challenge and focus on key areas for development. Performance information is used effectively at strategic and operational levels, with weekly data provided to managers and discussed at monthly performance clinics. Most frontline managers seen by inspectors use the information well to monitor practice and performance. Performance monitoring arrangements are robust in tracking progress and there is evidence of improvement in performance in some key areas, for example in the improved timeliness of allocation of children's cases, initial child protection conferences and initial health assessments.

There are areas where improvement is slow. The high re-referral rates in the initial contact and referral team remain, the timeliness of social work assessments remains poor and the frequency of visits to children on plans is not consistent. This means

that potential risks to children are not always identified and children's needs are not addressed quickly enough.

Quality assurance processes are increasingly effective. Audits, including individual and themed case audits, are well aligned to performance data findings, and inform the training and development needs of staff. Case audits consistently identify shortfalls in the quality of assessments, chronologies, plans, case recording and management oversight. These reflect the themes identified by inspectors on this monitoring visit. However, the quality of audits is not consistent, and this currently limits their impact in driving improvement. Training is provided to managers to improve their learning and to promote consistency.

Inspectors continue to see progress in practice and performance since the last inspection in June 2015 and since the last monitoring visit in February 2017. This includes the improved use of chronologies, appropriate caseloads and children being seen within statutory timescales. There is regular, recorded supervision and improvements in the quality of some assessments. Social workers who met with inspectors know the children well, but this, with the impact of their work, is not sufficiently recorded on the child's file. Social workers and managers spoke positively about working in Sunderland and the support that they receive.

The IRO annual report 2016–17 highlights effective performance that is contributing to improvement, for example 97% of children participating in their looked-after review. There is a stable, permanent team of staff who have mixed caseloads of child protection and children looked after, averaging 71 children. The annual report and IRO scorecard show good analysis of performance and evidence of challenge and actions taken to address poor practice. Escalation processes have been modified and are more supportive in influencing improvement in practice before issues are escalated further. The IRO managers attend the corporate parenting board, scrutiny board and LSCB. This is leading to effective oversight of the quality of practice, for example their lead on multi-agency audits within the LSCB. IROs have developed closer working relationships with the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service, multifaith groups, social work teams and the change council, and this enables them to influence practice, raise awareness of their role and improve their relationships with children looked after.

In some teams, staff turnover is a significant challenge to maintaining consistent management oversight and direction. Audits of the tracked cases identify that management oversight and recorded decision making are not consistent. Performance data has identified that there are too many re-referrals, which means that potential risks to children are not always assessed and some children may not receive the services that they require to address their needs. As a result, TfC has undertaken two audits to understand the cause better. Action has been taken to improve management oversight and develop new workflow systems to make up for the deficiencies in the electronic recording system. However, the action taken to date has not resolved this key challenge.

Inspectors found that the identification and the management of risk at the point of referral are not always appropriate. The sampling by inspectors of re-referrals within the initial contact and referral team identified some weak practice and areas for improvement. These included delays in the allocation of children's cases and the progression of work, and weaknesses in management decision making in the identification of potential risks to children. Decisive action is being taken to address the issues identified by inspectors. TfC is undertaking a review of all re-referrals in the last three months to ensure that appropriate remedial action is taken, where necessary, and management decision making improved.

Despite concerted efforts prior to and since the establishment of TfC on 1 April 2017, progress in improving services is vulnerable. This is due to fragility in the permanence and stability of the workforce. The reliance on a high number of agency workers is a risk to securing improvement for children. Strategic leaders recognise this fragility and are tenacious in securing permanent staff with the relevant skills and experience to support children. The clear and well-focused recruitment and retention strategy has clear objectives to meet recruitment targets, retain staff and minimise risk to children during periods of change. As part of this strategy, TfC has been successful in recruiting 18 newly qualified social workers to start work in September. Four new permanent social workers have been appointed and four more will start work in September. Five permanent managers have recently been appointed.

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

Yours sincerely

Fiona Millns

Ofsted Inspector