

16 November 2017

Ms Fiona Brown
Executive Director of People's Services (Director of Children's Services)
Civic Centre
Burdon Road
Sunderland
Tyne and Wear
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Dear Ms Brown

Monitoring visit of Sunderland children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Sunderland which took place on 17 and 18 October 2017. As a result of the inspection judgement of inadequate in June 2015, Sunderland city council set up Together for Children (TfC) to deliver children's services functions on behalf of the council, including early help, social care and education services for children.

This was the fifth monitoring visit since Sunderland Council was judged inadequate for services to children who need help and protection. Overall, the local authority is making sustained progress in improving services for its children and young people.

The visit was carried out by Fiona Millns, Ofsted Inspector, and Lisa Summers, Her Majesty's Inspector.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress since the last inspection with regards to help and protection, in particular the contact, referral and assessment arrangements for children, young people and their families. Inspectors focused on:

- initial responses to children in need of help and protection including early help
- assessment of risk
- management decision-making, oversight and supervision
- information sharing
- the role of the designated officer
- partnership working
- application of thresholds
- the quality and timeliness of assessments
- the voice of the child.

The visit considered a range of evidence, including scrutiny of children's records and staff supervision files, interviews with social workers and managers, meetings with multi-agency representatives in respect of child sexual exploitation and domestic violence, and meetings with the designated officer overseeing allegations against adults who work with children. Inspectors also met with performance management and quality assurance managers, and scrutinised a wide range of data, audits and documentation.

Overview

TfC is making sustained progress in improving services for children in need of help and protection. There is evidence of progress in many areas, including the timeliness of decision-making on contacts and referrals, improved management oversight and better staff stability in some teams. Clear strategies are being developed to support practice and address staff recruitment. There are still significant areas of performance and practice that need to improve, especially in respect of the high number of re-referrals, the timeliness of assessments and management oversight of the quality of practice. TfC now needs to strengthen its focus on the quality of social work practice, especially in improving assessments and planning to ensure that the life experiences and outcomes for vulnerable children improve.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Based on the evidence gathered during the visit, there are areas of strength, areas where improvement is occurring and some areas where progress has not been quick enough. TfC's self-assessment also recognises that in some areas it is taking longer to demonstrate progress and impact.

Thresholds are well understood. New threshold guidance was launched in May 2017, and training is ongoing across the partnerships to ensure a consistent and robust response to concerns about children.

The integrated contact and referral team (ICRT) provides a timely and effective response to contacts through effective information sharing, clearly recorded decision-making and management oversight. This results in swift referrals for assessment and appropriate signposting to early help services. Only when appropriate are contacts stepped down to early help. Overall, strategy meetings are arranged promptly, attendance is good and records of meetings are clear, with good management rationale and decision-making. However, there are occasions when records show that social workers visit families before the strategy meeting has agreed how to undertake the investigation. This reduces the effectiveness of multi-agency information sharing and could hinder any possible police investigation.

The quality and timeliness of assessments are not consistent. Performance has been affected by a reliance on agency workers, resulting in high staff turnover, reallocation of work and increased caseloads. Consequently, the assessment team

has not met the timescales for the completion of assessments. Where assessments have been carried out the pressure on staff resulted in a poorer quality of work. A project team was engaged in August 2017 to undertake and manage new assessments for a period of 13 weeks. This has enabled the assessment team to complete outstanding assessments and has reduced its caseloads to a manageable level. To further support practice and responses, TfC has also recently appointed to the assessment team a coordinator for issues of domestic abuse.

In the most recent assessments, the quality of work is clearly improving. Relevant information is collated, including consideration of absent fathers and the wider family. There is evidence of the use of direct work to good effect. The voice of the child was seen in assessments and clearly informed workers about how it is for the child at home. Chronologies are consistently used as part of the assessment process. Analysis is improved and there is some evidence of the use of research to inform the assessments. However, the consistency and quality of assessments are variable, and this remains a priority area for improvement for TfC.

Despite the improvements in the most recent assessments, the majority of children's plans are not good enough to ensure that their needs are met. Some of the plans are adult focused and fail to address the needs of children. Written agreements are used too often, especially when actions should be included as part of the child protection plan.

Statutory visits are timely. However, children are not consistently seen alone. A new framework for reporting visits is helping social workers to ensure that key questions are addressed. Where the framework is used well, the voice of the child is clearly seen and contributes effectively to understanding children's experiences and progressing work.

The 'Missing, sexually exploited and trafficked' (MSET) intelligence group provides good oversight and enhances local responses to children at risk of sexual exploitation. Where there is a concern of child sexual exploitation, all children have a risk assessment and the findings are collated by the MSET coordinator. However, the assessments undertaken by social workers for children at risk of sexual exploitation vary in quality and are not always updated to reflect current risks. Disruption plans are also of poor quality. Work is ongoing to address these quality issues and the understanding of the role of MSET. Despite the poor quality of assessment and plans, Sanctuary South, a multi-agency response to investigate and disrupt child sexual exploitation, is doing some very effective work.

The quality and timeliness of return home interviews for children who go missing are good. Reports are detailed and analytical, and help to protect children. Information is shared and appropriately escalated when necessary. However, the manual tracking of data reduces the effectiveness of identifying trends, hotspots and people of concern.

During the summer 2017, in response to the high numbers of re-referrals, TfC carried out a targeted audit of re-referrals to children's social care. Its analysis identified factors where a re-referral may be more likely. These included domestic abuse, ineffective interventions, poor-quality assessments and plans, and a lack of consistency in management oversight. While the audit report is comprehensive, the resulting action plan does not sufficiently address specific aspects of the quality of practice and outcomes for children. This particularly relates to ensuring that the voice of the child is considered in assessment and planning, that plans focus on the child, and that core groups and care team meetings consistently focus on the actions required to improve outcomes for children.

Domestic violence is a key factor in referrals to ICRT and in the high number of re-referrals. The Sunderland domestic violence partnership has been reinvigorated to oversee the priority actions around domestic abuse and violence against women and girls, as contained in the city-wide 'Safer Sunderland' delivery plan. There is a range of services available, including new initiatives such as the national pilot of the 'Change that lasts' model. The multi-agency domestic abuse referral pathway and guidance launched in November 2016 are not embedded in practice, and some staff are not fully aware of the services available to support children and families. Operation 'Encompass', launched in Sunderland in April 2017 to share police information on domestic incidents with all schools, is having a good impact. A representative from one school reported, 'It's one of the most useful bits of info that comes across my desk.' Despite these initiatives and the wide range of services, TfC knows that services are not sufficiently coordinated to meet local needs across Sunderland.

Comprehensive performance data ensures that TfC has oversight of key areas of practice and performance. The performance data enables TfC to prioritise its quality assurance activity to inform development and action plans. The quality of audits has improved, and those submitted as part of the case tracking were accurate. Performance data includes a brief commentary, but this analysis does not sufficiently evaluate the quality of practice to improve outcomes for children.

The tracking and monitoring of allegations against professionals are not always robust. Concerns progressing to referral are swiftly addressed, and strategy meetings are held to ensure that children are safeguarded. All referrals are tracked effectively and reviewed until the conclusion of investigations. Appropriate advice and guidance are provided by the designated officer. However, ongoing concerns requiring additional information to inform next steps are not routinely tracked to ensure that children are safe.

Overall, the stability of the workforce has improved within ICRT, and all posts are now covered by permanent staff. However, within the assessment team the use of agency staff is still high, at 50%. Although some have been in post for a long period, this remains a vulnerability. To reduce reliance on agency staff, there has been a spotlight on recruitment activity. This has resulted in over 75 new starters being

welcomed into TfC since April 2017. Recruitment and retention of staff remain key priorities and challenges. A new recruitment and retention strategy has a range of actions designed to fill recruitment gaps and bring stability to the workforce.

Staff receive supervision on a regular basis. Case discussion is, in the main, detailed. There are opportunities to discuss personal development and human resource issues. Although a pro forma for supervision is provided, it is not consistently used to ensure effective management oversight of practice, including whether children have been seen alone and whether previous actions have been addressed, and to consider individual performance and the quality of work. Staff reported feeling well supported by managers within both the ICRT and the assessment team.

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