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Dear John

Focused visit to South Tyneside children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to South Tyneside children's services on 27 February 2019. The visit was carried out by Her Majesty's Inspectors Lisa Summers and Ian Young.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need, those subject to a child protection plan, and the response to children who go missing.

Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including case discussions with social workers and managers. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information, audits of current practice and children's case records.

Overview

At the last Ofsted inspection of children's services in November 2017, the local authority was judged to be good overall. The continual improvement of performance and quality assurance systems means that senior managers and leaders know their service well, and this enables them to target resources appropriately. This has led to the development of a bespoke model of social work practice to better support children in need of help and protection.

Learning from the previous inspection is enhancing social work practice. For example, there are improvements in relation to the response to children missing from home and care, which was previously an area of weakness. Improved management oversight and a strengthened focus on the voice of children is leading to more responsive interventions and planning. The introduction of a dedicated edge of care service is helping children to stay at home when it is safe to do so, and

timely action is taken for children to enter care when concerns escalate.

Strong engagement and planning with partners at a strategic level is not translating into a quick enough operational response in all areas. For example, children experience delays in accessing specialist services to improve their emotional well-being, and there are no therapeutic services for children experiencing domestic abuse. Children who go missing from home and care are now better engaged in return home interviews. However, the quality is variable, and these interviews are not always informing care planning. There are some areas where social work practice is of variable quality, particularly in relation to assessments and plans.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The quality of social work assessments and plans to ensure they are all of a consistently high quality.
- The quality of return home interviews and use of intelligence to inform planning for children.
- The provision and accessibility of therapeutic and mental health services to meet children's needs.

Findings

- Senior managers and leaders understand well the needs of their community, recognising the challenges of tackling entrenched neglect within families, as well as the need to stop the cycle of repeated interventions over time. In response, the local authority has recently introduced its own bespoke social work practice model, intended to build on the strengths of and promote resilience in families. Inspectors saw examples of how this was starting to improve the quality of direct work with children. However, it is too soon to see the full impact systemically, and it will take time to fully embed.
- Children in need of help and protection benefit from timely assessments. However, those assessments seen were not always of consistently high quality. Assessments do not consistently understand children's lived experiences or demonstrate an understanding of cumulative impact. A small number do not comprehensively analyse risk and protective factors or what needs to change to improve children's circumstances. Family dynamics are not routinely considered in the context of the child's relationships with their brothers and sisters, and the diverse needs of the child arising from their unique background and culture is not always sufficiently explored. Assessments for court seen within the scope of this visit were generally of a higher standard, providing a clear analysis of risk, and giving a good sense of the child's world.
- Child in need and child protection plans vary in quality. Some good-quality plans

were seen. However, some are too adult focused and too many are not timebound in order to support identification of priority actions or to effectively measure change over time. Children's unique needs are not always detailed well enough, and plans do not always identify how these needs will be individually met. For example, for some children exposed to domestic abuse, planning does not always centre on their needs in order to mitigate the impact of the harm they have suffered. The use of professional jargon in plans means that children and families will not always be able to understand or relate to their plan. Although social workers can articulate clear contingency plans, these are not always well recorded, and it is therefore not always clear if families and partners understand what action will be taken if change is not achieved.

- Senior managers have actively strengthened the voice and influence of children. Children's views are routinely sought and captured using a range of innovative tools, and they are used effectively to inform care planning. At all levels of experience, social workers speak with assurance and confidence about their children. Although manageable workloads mean that children are seen regularly by their social workers, senior managers recognise the need to lower caseloads further to facilitate greater case reflection and better improve consistency in practice.
- The comparatively high prevalence of domestic abuse in South Tyneside is well understood. Senior managers and partners are taking appropriate action to review existing commissioned services. However, when therapeutic support is needed, individual children experience too much delay in accessing this and there is no specialist service for children experiencing domestic abuse.
- Children and families benefit from a dedicated and skilled team of family support workers, who provide bespoke interventions for children in need or those who are subject of child protection plans. The team is comprised of workers from a wide and diverse range of professional backgrounds and skill sets, which have been further enhanced through specialised training, including on working with victims and perpetrators of domestic abuse. This provides an additional layer of direct work with families, for example to develop resilience and parenting skills.
- Children benefit from timely and regular child protection conferences, core groups and child in need reviews. Meetings are well attended by partner agencies that share information effectively. In most cases seen, risk to children is appropriately reviewed, progress against the plan is measured, and, where necessary, plans are amended in response to emerging circumstances.
- Children receive a timely and proportionate social work response to manage risk and meet their needs. Where risks reduce, and situations improve, children are provided with support appropriately at a lower level. When children's circumstances do not improve, child protection procedures or pre-proceedings are initiated appropriately through a well-chaired and directive legal planning panel. Letters before proceedings detail well the concerns of the local authority.

However, some language used can be overly professional and less meaningful to parents. Public law outline tracking information does not sufficiently monitor key milestones, and this limits the ability of the local authority to understand the effectiveness of the process.

- The successful Families First service works effectively with children on the edge of care in order to prevent children from becoming looked after. The service has already worked with over a hundred children, with very few needing to enter care. In the cases sampled, children experienced swift and responsive help to support them in staying with their families when it is safe to do so. Inspectors saw the exceptionally wide variety of help for children and families, including parenting networks and short-term breaks. Tailored packages of intervention are provided in line with detailed support plans, and these are reviewed regularly to ensure that children and their families are receiving services that promote positive parenting and divert them from care.
- For those children recently entering care, all met the legal threshold. For a small number, this was because of family crisis.
- Children who go missing from home and care have received an improved service since the last inspection. The recent appointment of a dedicated missing coordinator is enhancing workers' ability to engage with children and young people more effectively. This is evidenced through significantly increased acceptance rates of return home interviews. Greater scrutiny of the quality of return home interviews ensures that standards are more consistently applied, but the quality is not consistently good. Children's circumstances and safeguarding concerns are not always fully explored, and intelligence from interviews does not routinely inform care planning for children.
- Senior managers continue to ensure that social workers are well trained and supported. All social workers spoken with valued the bespoke core skills training supporting the newly developed social work practice model. This provides them with practical tools to sharpen their practice. Social workers told inspectors that they benefit from regular management supervision. Managers are highly visible and additional support is provided when needed. For example, the local authority has invested in recruiting assistant team managers and this is providing additional oversight of child in need meetings. Inspectors saw some examples of high-quality supervision providing reflection and adding value to case direction. Actions from previous meetings are appropriately reviewed to ensure completion, but are not sufficiently focused on improving children's outcomes.
- Senior managers and leaders have a good understanding of frontline practice through strengthened performance and quality assurance. Performance management is well embedded. Performance data is used intelligently to identify areas of practice needing further scrutiny. Audits are now completed in partnership with social workers and are an accurate reflection of the quality of practice. Corrective actions are suitably identified, but could be further enhanced

with timescales for completion.

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

Yours sincerely

Lisa Summers
Her Majesty's Inspector