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Dear Ewen

Focused visit to Newcastle upon Tyne children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Newcastle upon Tyne children's services on 3 September 2019. The inspectors were Jan Edwards, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Ian Young, Her Majesty's Inspector.

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

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

Overview

At the last Ofsted inspection of Newcastle upon Tyne children's services, in April 2017, the overall effectiveness of the service was judged to require improvement to be good. Senior leaders have recognised that the model of social work delivery was not responsive enough to changing demands and service pressures. It was restructured early this year to support continuous improvement and the ambition to provide consistently good and outstanding services for children.

Senior leaders have been resolute in their focus, and have received significant support from councillors and the chief executive and financial investment. At the time of this visit, senior managers had made significant strides in creating a more stable workforce. They had increased capacity through additional social work teams, and reduced caseloads to a manageable level, enabling social workers to build effective relationships and undertake meaningful direct work.

Social workers and managers are positive about the changes and the benefits to their work and practice with families. Assessments are child-focused and mostly of a good quality. However, most plans are overly task-focused and fail to consider what outcomes they want to achieve to improve the child's circumstances. This means that social workers are measuring success by looking at whether a task has been completed rather than whether the child's circumstances have changed. Direct work is helping social workers to understand children's experiences, although their voice is not as well articulated in assessments and plans.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- Social work plans to demonstrate a clear focus on the child's progress and the impact and outcome of interventions.
- Representation of the child's voice and their wishes and feelings.
- Supervision to reflect on the impact and quality of practice, to ensure that the work is focused on outcomes for the child and to monitor whether actions identified through supervision and auditing have been taken.
- The electronic management system to ensure that it is fit for purpose and reflects an accurate and up-to-date record of the work on individual children's cases.

Findings

- Senior leaders and managers understand well the changing needs of the local community, recognising the increasing complexity of the needs of children and families. The self-assessment demonstrates an accurate understanding of children's experience and progress. It reflects the level of work undertaken to stabilise the workforce and reduce caseloads safely and to achieve compliance with performance targets.
- The robust performance management is ensuring improved compliance so that work is being completed within the timescales that are right for the child. Performance systems are well embedded and supplemented by an informatics and insights team to ensure that senior leaders have a coherent understanding of themes and trends. This ensures that audit activity is appropriately targeted.
- When there are heightened concerns about children or increases in risk, strategy meetings ensure that appropriate action is taken to safeguard children. Child protection enquiries and assessments demonstrate a clear purpose, course of action and rationale for decision-making. These assessments are mostly of good quality, with thorough analyses, and use an evidence-based methodology for assessing risk. They use historical and multi-agency information well and seek the views of different parties.

- In a small number of child protection enquiries, there is too narrow a focus on the presenting issue so that wider issues and all risks to children are not always considered. In a small number of cases, there was a missed opportunity to conduct joint enquiries to manage risk more effectively.
- A range of assessments, including pre-birth, parenting and viability assessments, evidence a well-written analysis of risk that results in clear and appropriately focused recommendations.
- Social workers visit children regularly and develop strong and positive relationships with them. Children are benefiting from some creative and meaningful direct work undertaken by social workers using a range of tools and activities, some of which they develop and are bespoke according to need. A lot of work has been done to support social workers in developing their understanding of the child's world and their lived experience. As a result, most assessments bring the child to life and demonstrate insight into the impact of their lived experience. However, the child's voice and wishes and feelings are not as effectively represented, and this is particularly the case for younger children.
- Assessments clearly identify and analyse risks to children, but they do not lead to plans of similar quality. Children in need plans are easy to understand, but they are overly focused on tasks and actions rather than an identified outcome for children, and not all are timebound. This means that parents and professionals know what needs to happen and who is going to do it, but too often they do not know what they are aiming for and they rarely know when it will be done by.
- Children in need plans are regularly reviewed by the care team. Although there is a lack of focus on outcomes, care teams monitor the progress against the tasks and effectively identify future actions. Partners are well engaged and contribute well to deliver their part of the plan. This means that children still benefit from services and interventions which are demonstrably making a difference and improving their experience.
- There is a strong emphasis in child protection case conferences on risk and identifying safety goals. However, these safety goals are not always outcome-based and are not meaningfully timebound to ensure effective monitoring of the plan. Practice is challenged effectively by child protection chairs, and this ensures that plans are progressed, delay is reduced and deficits in practice are addressed.
- The current electronic case management system, which is planned to be replaced next year, does not provide an accurate and up-to-date record of children's circumstances. This is because not all children's case records are uploaded in a timely way. Sometimes there is only partial uploading or records

are not replicated on all children of the family. The director of children's services gave assurances that this would be addressed immediately and ahead of the implementation of the new system.

- Managers provide a clear rationale for decisions. Social workers feel well supported and value regular supervision. Managers use supervision to provide a steer on cases through the provision of clear guidance and tasks but are not using it to monitor progress towards completion of the tasks or as a follow-up to actions arising from audit activity. While social workers report that supervisions provide space to help them think differently, there is little or no written evidence of this level of reflection.
- Where progress is not being made or risks continue to increase, children are escalated into the public law outline (PLO), or proceedings are appropriately issued. Senior leaders were aware of the drift and delay arising from ineffectual monitoring of the work in the PLO and have introduced a more proactive legal planning process with revised and robust tracking. As a result, more recent cases demonstrate that cases are monitored more closely and reviewed in a timely fashion. There are examples of effective planning and practice within pre-proceedings, resulting in timely exit from this process. Letters before proceedings do not explicitly define timescales and this means that parents are unclear about the expectations of them in this process.
- Where children at risk of abuse and neglect are on the edges of care, a specialist team adds significant value to social workers' plans to keep them safely within their own family. Families receive an intensive service based on an established, evidence-based model of intervention. Referrals for adult mental health services are fast-tracked by the team's attached psychiatrist, which promotes the timely delivery of treatment plans.
- Senior managers and leaders have a good understanding of frontline practice through a comprehensive performance data set and quality assurance framework. Data, and information from an embedded cycle of auditing practice, is used well to identify areas of practice needing further scrutiny. Audits are reflective and support social workers to be curious about their own practice. Corrective actions with tight timescales for completion are suitably identified. A process of moderation provides a check and balance on audits, where professional judgement is applied. Practice improvement is delivered creatively and innovatively by the principal social worker through the well-attended and highly valued Social Work Forum. The quality assurance and performance framework has the capacity to support effective continuous learning and service improvement.
- Social workers and managers are positive about the new restructure and the further plans to capitalise on the improvements that have already been achieved through the implementation of a relational family valued model. This

is intended to embed an approach where social work can flourish through developing excellent quality and consistency of practice.

Ofsted will publish this letter and take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning your next inspection or visit. This letter will be shared with the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Jan Edwards
Her Majesty's Inspector