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31 October 2019

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Dear Sara Tough

Focused visit to Norfolk children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Norfolk County Council children's services on 8 and 9 October 2019. The inspectors were Nigel Parkes, HMI, and Marcie Taylor, HMI.

The focus of this visit was on the local authority's arrangements for dealing with contacts and referrals from families, members of the public and professionals at the 'front door', and on decisions made about what should happen next. Inspectors carefully considered the local authority's ability to identify, assess and manage needs and risks safely and appropriately.

Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including children's case records. They talked to staff and managers, as well as to representatives of partner agencies. Inspectors also evaluated the local authority's performance management and quality assurance information.

Overview

Since the previous inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers in November 2017, the front door has been transformed. Thresholds have been revised and re-launched, and a new operating model has been introduced. The children's advice and duty service (CADS) has significantly improved the way in which information is shared, analysed and recorded at the first point of contact. With appropriate checks and balances, and effective leadership and management oversight, staff in the CADS work well together to identify the kind of help and protection that children and families need. The quality of decision-making is consistently strong. Throughput is timely.

The success of the CADS, which is a genuinely multi-agency initiative, would not have been possible without strong and effective strategic partnerships, particularly with the police and with health services, or the support of elected members. The level of improvement achieved provides tangible evidence of the impact of senior leaders on social work practice at the front door. However, similar improvement has not been achieved in some of the still relatively new, locality-based family assessment and safeguarding teams (FAST). There remain significant shortfalls in the quality of practice in some of these teams.

Recruitment and retention continue to be major challenges. A lack of consistency between different teams and different localities is also an issue. Weaknesses in the level of critical challenge provided by some managers have clearly been contributory factors. Senior leaders know what the issues are. They are in the process of further developing and strengthening their performance management information and quality assurance systems in order to be able to bear down on poor practice and systematically drive improvement. However, the quality of help and protection that children and young people receive once they leave the CADS is not always good enough.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The timeliness and quality of assessments undertaken by family assessment and safeguarding teams.
- The consistency, quality and impact of management oversight in the family assessment and safeguarding teams

Findings

- Norfolk no longer uses referral forms. Anyone who is concerned about a child or family is able to speak to someone in the children's advice and duty service, which is open from 8 am to 8 pm. Professionals who do this have immediate and direct access to experienced consultant social workers. The emphasis is on 'constructive conversations' and on understanding 'the story of family life' together. This collaborative approach is helping to build professional confidence and resilience and has contributed to a reduction in inappropriate referrals and the number of assessments which conclude that there is no need for social work intervention. It is also proving to be extremely popular with other professionals, as evidenced by feedback from surveys.
- The quality of the conversations that early help pathway advisers and consultant social workers have with people who contact CADS reflects the quality of the training they have received. They calmly and carefully sift and record the relevant information in a way that demonstrates a shared commitment to exploring the issues and concerns in order to identify appropriate solutions. The emphasis is on making sure that children and young people get the right service at the right time. Thresholds are appropriately applied and alternatives to social

work intervention are explored thoroughly. This is helping to ensure that children and families are not subjected to child protection procedures unnecessarily.

- The threshold document has been revised and re-launched since the last inspection. Written in plain English and making good use of graphics to support its simple child-centred messages, it is easy to read and understand.
- The huge open plan office in which CADS is co-located with police and other partners, including health and education partners, facilitates the easy exchange of information in real time between partner agencies, albeit always in line with the appropriate constraints of data protection and other legislation. Consent is routinely considered and clearly recorded. This approach, and the richness of information generated, is helping to protect children.
- CADS is well managed and well led. Although the service has only been in existence for 12 months, it does not feel new. Staff understand the systems and processes and are clearly comfortable with them. Approachable and accessible managers, who are always readily available, have their fingers on the pulse. Making good and effective use of performance management and quality assurance systems, including regular dip-sampling and auditing of live calls, helps to ensure that thresholds are applied consistently and in good time. There are appropriate checks and balances at every stage of the process. Contacts and referrals are progressed promptly without any unnecessary delay.
- Prompt action is taken to protect children who are judged to be at immediate risk of significant harm. The development of CADS has contributed to an appropriate reduction in the number of strategy discussions. Most are timely, involve an appropriate range of professionals and facilitate the effective sharing of information. In most cases, decisions taken and action agreed are clearly recorded. This helps to ensure that s47 enquiries are appropriate, well informed and well coordinated.
- With police domestic abuse teams sitting alongside CADS, response to domestic abuse at the front door is well developed and increasingly effective. This includes daily multi-agency risk assessment conferences, a joined-up approach to Claire's Law applications and early morning calls to schools following domestic abuse incidents involving their pupils. With the police now appropriately filtering out low-level incidents of domestic abuse, CADS is able to ensure a timely and proportionate response to children and families involved in incidents that have been risk assessed as standard, medium or high.
- The multi-agency child exploitation and missing team based alongside CADS is equally effective, helping to ensure a timely and proportionate response at the front door. The timely offer and completion of return home interviews has improved significantly since the last inspection, as has the way in which

information and intelligence are shared, analysed and used to safeguard and protect children and young people and disrupt the activity of perpetrators.

- However, once children's cases are passed from CADS to the still relatively new, locality-based FAST teams, children do not always get the right level of help and protection. While most cases are allocated promptly, a combination of caseload pressures and a lack of effective management oversight in some cases mean that children are not always seen as quickly as they need to be. Additionally, on occasions, social workers have been slow to start children's assessments, and the quality of those assessments is not always sufficiently rigorous or robust. This is contributing to higher-than-average re-referral rates in some localities, particularly when cases are closed or are stepped down too soon.
- Senior leaders are aware of the problems and are taking appropriate action to address them but, while there is evidence of improvement, this is from a low base. High-quality performance dashboards, introduced in May this year, mean that managers at all levels now have the tools they need to be able to monitor performance effectively, and the ability to drill down into the activity of individuals, teams and localities. This is helping to increase accountability and strengthen the level of scrutiny.
- The quality assurance framework is mature and well developed. Senior leaders are using audit activity intelligently to better understand the quality of practice at the frontline, and drive improvement in a targeted way through a cycle of audits, learning events, action plans and re-audits. A good example of this is the introduction of a multi-agency weekly case review meeting in the CADS that tracks, and reports to middle and senior management on, the progress of cases once they leave the front door.
- Workforce stability continues to be problematic, especially in the north of the county. In response to a net loss of social workers and an increase in staff turnover over the last 12 months, senior leaders have developed an ambitious strategy. This includes significant financial investment from elected members, designed to improve recruitment and retention while at the same time freeing up social workers and their managers to focus on professional social work tasks. In the meantime, some FAST social workers' caseloads are far too high.

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

Yours sincerely

Nigel Parkes
Her Majesty's Inspector