

15 February 2018

Ms Fiona Brown
Executive Director of People's Services (Director of Children's Services)
Civic Centre
Burdon Road
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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 23 and 24 January 2018. 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 sixth monitoring visit since Sunderland council was judged inadequate for services to children who need help and protection. Overall, the local authority is making steady 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 early help arrangements for children, young people, and their families. Inspectors focused on:

- the offer of help at the earliest opportunity
- the assessment of need
- the quality of early help plans and planning
- management decision-making, oversight and supervision
- information sharing
- partnership working

- application of thresholds
- the voice of the child
- the effectiveness of Sunderland safeguarding children's board (SSCB) in monitoring and improving early help services.

The visit considered a range of evidence, including scrutiny of children's records and staff supervision files, interviews with early help workers, social workers and managers, and meetings with the chair and business manager of the SSCB. Inspectors also met with performance management and quality assurance managers, and scrutinised a wide range of data, audits and documentation.

Overview

TfC is making steady progress in improving services when problems first emerge for children, young people and their families. The refreshed early help service was established in April 2017 and is already demonstrating a significant increase in the take up of early help services: from 252 open cases in April 2017 to 646 open cases in December 2017. Schools and Northumbria police in particular are more engaged and have an increased understanding about the threshold to children's social care and their roles in providing early help to children and their families. However, it is too early to see the full impact of these developments.

The new early help service took almost two years to be set up following the last inspection, and the early help and neglect strategies were only launched in autumn 2017. Currently, the majority of early help plans are managed by TfC, with just 15% being managed by other agencies. TfC is working effectively with other agencies to manage the early help response and to further develop information sharing across agencies. Positively, early help staff within TfC clearly understand what is to be achieved and the flexibility required in their approach. However, there are inconsistencies in the quality of assessment, planning and management oversight.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Management oversight of practice is limited because the current electronic case recording systems are not able to collate some important data about the impact and quality of early help and there is very little commentary and analysis about what this means for children and families. This means that TfC are not yet able to fully address deficits in the quality of early help responses to children and families. The recently introduced case auditing process has rightly focused on compliance with processes. Now that systems are established, the local authority is aware that it needs to improve consistency in the quality of practice, and a new electronic recording system is being launched directly following this monitoring visit.

SSCB has been instrumental in the launching of the early help strategy and the neglect toolkit, and has been influential in ensuring the right level of accountability across the partnership. Partners have an increased understanding about the part

they play in providing early help to children and families. The board chair knows that there is more to do, especially in improving partners' confidence in managing the work to support families at an early stage. The board has commissioned focused training to support the introduction of the neglect toolkit. The SSCB performance and quality assurance programme board has two multi-agency audits planned for early 2018 to look at the effectiveness of early help intervention, 'step down' from children's social care, and the early help response to domestic abuse, including the effectiveness of Operation Encompass.

Schools in particular are enthusiastic about the early help strategy and Northumbria police service has seconded three community support officers into the early help locality teams as part of a six-month project to support an earlier response to families involved in crime and anti-social behaviour and to better understand how early help could reduce the need for higher level interventions.

Referrals to the early help service are made directly to the early help teams by agencies and families but are also passed on by staff in the integrated contact and referral team. Where appropriate, some referrals are considered at the early help panel which meets fortnightly. This is a multi-agency forum established to triage children's cases to determine whether early help support is required or if universal services can meet needs. The panel provides an effective forum to share information, determine level of need and allocate children's cases.

Inspectors found that early help plans demonstrated some effective work with families in offering support where needs were often complex. One parent reported: 'I was angry at first but it's the best thing ever... I'm a better parent to my child.' Early help workers are consistently providing parenting support as well as undertaking direct work with children. Early help workers spoken to demonstrated a clear understanding of their work within a broader context of supporting and protecting children, and could speak with authority about children and families that they are working with. However, the quality of practice is inconsistent.

The voice of the child is not always considered in assessments, and plans do not always include clear timescales for actions to be completed. Strategic partnerships are established but operationally multi-agency working is not fully embedded. When children's cases are stepped up to or down from statutory services, information sharing protocols are not always followed. Important information is not always shared effectively to inform and coordinate ongoing work with children and families about risks and needs. This results in a need for additional repetitive work for staff, children and families and increases the likelihood of delays in appropriate services being provided.

In the main, early help workers receive regular monthly supervision. Supervision considers personal development, training and case management. However, good supervision practice is not consistently applied and actions are not always prioritised with clear timescales. Where practice is stronger, there is clear consideration of

changing circumstances, risks and thresholds within children's cases and the early response to children and families is improving.

The self-assessment, provided by TfC for this monitoring visit, reflects well the progress and areas for development of early help services in Sunderland. These correlate with inspectors findings. The action plan to address the areas for development is appropriately focused, guidance has been produced and shared where necessary, and improvements in the quality of work could be seen in the more recent assessments and plans.

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

Fiona J Millns
Ofsted Inspector