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Ms Helen Riley
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Dear Ms Riley

Focused visit to Staffordshire County Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Staffordshire County Council children's services on 26 and 27 June 2018. The visit was conducted by Alison Smale and Julie Knight, two of Her Majesty's Inspectors.

Inspectors evaluated the local authority's arrangements for the protection of vulnerable adolescents. Inspectors considered the experiences and progress of children whose cases are open to early help services, children in need, children subject to child protection plans and children in care.

A range of evidence was looked at. This included: holding case discussions with social workers and support workers; reviewing case records; and speaking with young people and their parents or carers. Inspectors also scrutinised relevant local authority performance management and quality assurance information.

Overview

A restructure of the children's social care service is planned. Senior managers believe that the changes will have a positive impact on workforce capacity, caseloads and the quality of practice, resulting in improved outcomes for children and young people. These changes have been delayed for reasons outside of the control of children's social care.

Thresholds for access to social care services in Staffordshire are understood and they are applied appropriately by social workers and partners. Concerns are escalated from early help to safeguarding teams. Strategy meetings are used effectively to address risks of significant harm.

However, the recent rise in workloads, caused by an increased turnover of social workers, has resulted in a small number of children not receiving a good enough level of service, particularly where new risks emerge for children whose cases are already open to children's social care. Excessively high caseloads in some social work teams across the service are having an adverse impact on social workers' ability to see children in accordance with their plans. Social workers try to see the children they work with regularly so that they can understand their lived experiences. However, many social workers are struggling to see children enough in order to make direct work meaningful and to achieve change.

Supervision and management oversight is not progressing plans effectively for some vulnerable young people. Inspectors saw some evidence of drift. While no children were seen at risk of significant harm, drift did result in continuing vulnerability for a small but significant number of children and young people whose cases are open to children's services. The local authority does not robustly capture the quality of social work practice through its audit activity. The local authority acknowledges that senior managers do not undertake individual formal audits of case files and that this would enhance their line of sight on practice and its impact on children.

Senior leaders recognise that improvements to the service must be made as quickly as possible to address the high workloads of social workers, to ensure first line management oversight, and to re-establish the stability that has, until now, been a positive feature of this local authority.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The audit process does not robustly capture or ensure that senior managers have a clear line of sight on the quality of social work practice and its impact on children. Audits seen focus predominantly on process and compliance and do not accurately reflect the quality of practice. This does not enable sufficient learning from audits and has resulted in an overly optimistic overview of practice in quality assurance reports.
- High workloads are impacting on social workers and support workers in both children's social care and early help services, meaning that some parts of the service are fragile. For this cohort of vulnerable children, high workloads in some parts of the service mean that staff do not see young people regularly enough to build a trusting relationship, particularly those young people who are hard to engage and have more complex needs.
- Workloads vary across teams and this creates inequities of service for children and families. Where workloads are lower, for example in the pilot service, staff see children and families more often, develop better relationships, undertake more effective direct work, improved multi-agency planning and offer more practical help. This work results in changes for and positive impacts on young people.

- While management decisions are regularly recorded, supervision records lack sufficient evaluation and smart actions. Supervision is not used effectively to find solutions to barriers. This means that managers are not sufficiently progressing the cases of some vulnerable children. More evaluative supervision was evident in the family intervention project, where staff reported the positive value of peer supervision and writing up case studies to enable reflection and learning.
- Children's plans are not smart enough. Actions do not have sufficient purpose or prioritisation in terms of timescales. Planning meetings do not happen regularly enough and, in some cases, they are not recorded. Staff with excessive workloads prioritise and, as a result, their case recording is not sufficiently up to date or detailed. Inspectors saw some significant gaps in a minority of children's case files. This means that some important knowledge about children may be lost and may not inform future actions and risk assessments.

Findings

- The local authority has clear strategic plans in place to improve and strengthen their approach to vulnerable adolescents by implementing an integrated partnership approach that is based on contextualised safeguarding. Strategic partnership arrangements are in place with key agencies, including the police and youth offending service. This work is well supported by the Staffordshire safeguarding children board.
- Joint working between the child sexual exploitation and missing children coordinators ensures good identification of vulnerable children. Much work is being done to fully understand the profile of vulnerable young people in the county. The local authority has commissioned a specialist provider to undertake child sexual exploitation intervention work with young people, as well as developing a child sexual exploitation good practice guide that has been shared with practitioners across Staffordshire. Despite the risk from gangs not yet being a significant issue, the local authority has recognised the potential future risk and is working proactively to develop a more integrated and effective response. The local authority has clear and active plans in place for developing its approach to gangs, trafficking and modern slavery.
- The child sexual exploitation panel is well understood and is used effectively by social workers. A child exploitation risk matrix is embedded, and social workers regularly update it. In many cases, this work is used well as a direct work tool with children and young people. Despite this, it is not being used sufficiently well to provide an overall evaluation of risks or an evaluation of the individual vulnerabilities of all children. The local authority recognises that the narrow focus of the child sexual exploitation panel means that other vulnerabilities do not receive the same level of scrutiny and management oversight. While the panel is an effective forum for tracking and making decisions to progress many children's cases, it needs to be more robust at progressing all cases that present wider risks of exploitation.

- Local support teams provide the early help service in Staffordshire. This service in turn provides some very positive direct work with young people and their families that recognises the emotional impact experienced by young people with vulnerabilities. Staff using the 'outcomes stars' method in one pilot area speak positively about the approach. Inspectors saw that the use of this tool is enabling improved benchmarking of progress and analysis. Work with families by the pilot team is more outcomes focused, and inspectors saw a greater level of partnership work with children and families that is having a positive impact. Timescales for achieving positive changes in families have improved, and this work is supported by the use of a tracker and prompts. Workloads are more manageable in the pilot team, following changes to the front door and improved screening. Workloads in other teams that are not included in the pilot remain too high and this results in an increased level of staff turnover and sickness.
- Despite shortfalls in some service areas, there are areas of strength. The work of the specialist unaccompanied asylum-seeking children team is effective. Staff are knowledgeable and well informed, and children benefit from their expertise. Social workers know children well and take time to get to know children's lived experience, including their culture and identity. Sibling needs are considered. When children are missing, multi-agency communication and responsiveness are timely and clear. Trafficking risks are identified, assessed and responded to. There are regular statutory reviews and it is positive that children remain looked after while missing for prolonged periods.
- Some young people with more complex vulnerabilities benefit from effective work by the intensive prevention service, which offers tenacious engagement and is effective at building relationships with young people who are hard to engage with. As a result of this work, the service reduces the risk to these young people. Staff access a wide range of relevant training. This means that staff are well informed and that they understand contextual safeguarding. Social workers are responsive and sensitive to young people identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender.
- When children go missing, the response is effective in the majority of cases. The local authority has commissioned a specialist return home interview service. Most children are seen and benefit from a timely and detailed interview which explores the detail of the missing episode with the young person, captures intelligence and makes recommendations in an effort to reduce risk further. It is a strength that this includes children placed by other local authorities in the Staffordshire area. The local authority acknowledges that there is a gap for their children in care placed out of area, where the response is less consistent.

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

Yours sincerely

Alison Smale
Her Majesty's Inspector

