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Mr Steve Walker
Interim Director of Children's Services
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Dear Mr Walker

Monitoring visit of Kirklees local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Kirklees local authority children's services on 4 and 5 December 2018. The visit was the latest monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in September 2016. This visit was carried out by Her Majesty's Inspectors, Rachel Holden and Matt Reed.

The local authority has made significant progress in improving its initial response to children and young people who need help and protection. Improvement is gathering pace and there is now increasing focus on quality as well as ensuring that statutory compliance is met.

Areas covered by the visit

During this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress being made in relation to:

- the assessment of risk within the initial response
- information-sharing and the multi-agency response to risk
- application of thresholds
- children being seen and seen alone, and their experiences being considered when assessments of risk are being made
- the quality of social work practice, including child protection plans
- management decision-making, oversight and supervision

A range of evidence was considered during the visit, including electronic case records, supervision notes, observation of social workers and advanced practitioners

undertaking referral and assessment duties, and other information provided by staff and managers. In addition, we spoke to a range of staff, including managers, social workers, other practitioners and administrative staff.

Overview

There has been a significant improvement since the last monitoring visit, which focused on the front door in November 2017, in relation to the initial response to children who need help and protection. In the cases seen, children are safe, and immediate risks are appropriately assessed using a multi-agency approach. Strengthened processes and effective management oversight is ensuring robust decision-making. This is monitored routinely and challenged appropriately. Assessment and plans are improved, with more assessments that better identify and evaluate risk and consider the experiences of children. The early help offer is still embedding and it is too soon to see its overall effectiveness, but inspectors saw evidence that children and families were receiving support based on their identified needs.

The local authority is aware, and inspectors saw, that there is still more to do to ensure that consistency and quality improves in relation to a timely initial response to cases where children need a social work assessment, and in relation to ensuring that children's records are comprehensive and up to date. In addition, in a small number of cases seen, children did not receive a social work assessment of needs when this would have been appropriate based on the presenting issues. A comprehensive core skills programme of training for social workers and managers has commenced in order to support good-quality improvements across the workforce.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Children are being offered appropriate and timely interventions to keep them safe when they are at risk of immediate harm. The initial assessment of risk is based on effective multi-agency information-sharing. There is appropriate management oversight, challenge and response in the majority of cases seen.

For those children who need a lower level response, for example when they don't require early help or immediate safeguarding, but may need a social worker assessment, the decision-making of these contacts is not always timely.

The system for monitoring the quality of decision-making has been strengthened. Decisions are routinely challenged and explored, for example some decisions made to not offer a social work service are reviewed in a multi-agency weekly forum. This is ensuring that more decisions are appropriate and child focused, and that there is a shared understanding of risk and thresholds among partner agencies.

Increasingly, and in the majority of cases seen, thresholds are being appropriately applied for children in need of a social work response. However, in a few cases seen

children were not offered a social work assessment of their needs when this would have been an appropriate course of action based on the presenting issues. Children who do not need this level of intervention are supported through a recently developed early help offer. While this is in its infancy, children are receiving interventions that are supporting them and their families appropriately. In some cases seen, opportunities to offer early help had been missed, although some of these were subsequently challenged through the multi-agency weekly meeting. An early support strategy has recently been developed, with partners setting out the multi-agency offer. It is too soon to measure the impact of this.

When there is a concern that a child is at risk of significant harm, a timely multi-agency strategy meeting is held. These meetings draw together agencies effectively so that they are able to share information and make decisions. A recent focus on improving the recording of these meetings has meant that they are now well documented. This enhances the ability to build a picture of the child's circumstances to inform decisions now and in the future.

The multi-agency response to risk is effective. Good attendance at multi-agency meetings was seen. Direct work is being completed with children and families by social workers and other agencies, including schools and health visitors. There is evidence that social workers put in place immediate safety planning with the families, although, at times, safety plans and agreements with parents are unrealistic, especially in domestic violence situations.

In most cases seen, assessments have been well informed by thorough information-gathering and historical information. Chronologies are being used to highlight significant issues, although these do not fully analyse the impact of events. The child's voice is evident in the assessment, although younger children are often not as well represented or considered as older and more verbal children are. The risk analysis of the information has improved.

The quality of child protection plans has improved since the last visit in July 2018. The majority are now clearly focused on the presenting issues, are time bound and are regularly reviewed. They are overseen by the independent chair of the child protection meeting and line managers. Evidence of challenge where plans were not meeting practice standards was also seen.

Children are seen and are seen alone. Children's understanding of safeguarding as well as their ability to keep themselves safe are considered. The recently established risk and vulnerabilities teams are offering effective return home interviews when children go missing.

At times, the richness of direct work and the relationships that social workers have with children were not as clearly conveyed in the records as they were in the verbal descriptions given. In addition, case notes are not always up to date. This means that management oversight is weakened.

During the inspection, inspectors saw weaker practice for some children who are receiving ongoing interventions. In some cases, children are not being seen in a timely way, and, in others, it is not clear whether visits have taken place within a suitable timeframe for the child.

Inspectors found mostly effective management decision-making at every level, and good independent reviewing officer oversight at the midway review of the child protection plan. Supervision continues to be regular and has recently improved. Some social workers now have the opportunity for reflection as well as direction about cases in their supervision sessions. The training offer is good. Workers state that this has positively improved their practice. A core skills training package is being implemented with all social workers to further strengthen and embed good practice.

Audits remain focused on compliance issues and are not sufficiently focused on children's experiences. The audits do not evaluate the quality of practice, which could further enhance learning. This has already been identified by managers as an area for improvement.

A new recording system has recently been introduced, which was an identified area for improvement at the inspection in 2016. Data migration to the new system has resulted in a temporary backlog of records waiting to be put on the system. The local authority expects to resolve this in the next few weeks.

The workforce is now increasingly stable. There has been a considerable improvement in the recruitment of permanent staff at all levels. The morale of those workers spoken to is good, and they feel well supported by managers.

Senior managers are using data effectively to inform their improvement journey. The report to the improvement board details the current performance, but also gives a continuous update on the areas that need to be improved. Performance targets are now suitably ambitious, with clear plans for, and continued monitoring of, priority areas in day-to-day practice.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Rachel Holden
Her Majesty's Inspector