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Margaret Whellans  
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Dear Margaret Whellans

### **Focused visit to Durham local authority children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Durham local authority children's services on 10 January 2019. The visit was carried out by Her Majesty's Inspectors Matt Reed and Lorna Schlechte.

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 and managers. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information, audits of current practice and children's case records.

### **Overview**

At the last inspection of children's services in 2016, the local authority was judged requires improvement to be good overall. Subsequently, a high turnover of staff and increasing demand for frontline services have resulted in caseload pressures, and this, as well as an outdated electronic recording system, has hindered the pace of change.

There has been appropriate financial commitment from the council and a service restructure to support the improvements needed. Appropriately focused improvement plans are firmly in place to address the shortfalls and they are starting to have an impact. Improving practice has been seen since August in relation to the identification of risk, timeliness of assessments, stability in the workforce, and performance management.

However, vulnerabilities remain in relation to delays in decision-making for some children. This is in part due to caseloads remaining high in some teams and inconsistencies in how cases requiring a social work assessment within duty teams are allocated. Management oversight and direction are not as sharply focused as they could be, and children's experiences are not consistently well recorded. This is not supporting accountability, effective planning for children, monitoring or challenge. Migration to a new electronic recording system and additional recruitment is imminent and it is envisaged that this will further embed the improvements needed. Plans to improve consistency of case allocation should be accelerated. Momentum in the pace of improvement needs to be maintained to ensure that children across the county receive a timely social work response that meets their needs.

### **What needs to improve in this area of social work practice**

- The consistency of allocation of cases awaiting social work assessment.
- The recording of the rationale for case decisions, and management direction.
- The reduction in delay for children at key threshold points to support a timely social work response.
- The quality of planning and social work plans.
- The recording of children's experiences in order to support accountability, effective planning, monitoring and challenge.

### **Findings**

- Over the last two years, there has been significant investment in children's services in order to fund the changes that are required to improve the quality and consistency of social work practice. The senior management team has been restructured and three heads of service posts have been created, with a view to supporting more targeted improvement in relation to education and skills, social care, and early help and inclusion. Additional social work posts have been created in the Families First teams. The edge of care team, Supporting Solutions, and the pre-birth assessment team were established in June 2018 following analysis of key pressures in this area of work. In the examples seen by inspectors, both teams were having a positive impact on the children with whom they worked.
- Senior leaders know themselves well and have clear and appropriately targeted action plans in place to address shortfalls. The local authority is open to challenge and is engaging with peers through partners in practice, as well as inviting external consultants to assist them with service improvements. The performance management framework has been improved to facilitate more regular review of performance issues and the quality of work. This is relatively new, but is showing early signs of impact in terms of the progression of work. There is more to do in this area to ensure consistency across the county.

- A model of social work practice is being implemented and staff have been trained to strengthen the analysis of risk within assessments. There was evidence of an increasing use of the framework in the assessments seen during this visit.
- The local authority is fully aware that the current electronic recording system is outdated, and a new system has been procured and is due to go live on the 1 February 2019. The local authority envisages that this will improve recording and facilitate a more responsive system for performance management and oversight. At the present time, case recording is not clearly demonstrating work completed with children and families in order to support decision-making and accountable practice and to enable managers to have clear oversight of the quality of work.
- The recruitment and retention of workers is being prioritised by the council to reduce caseloads, and a commitment has been made to establishing caseloads of 20 per worker. Measures have been put in place to support the retention of staff and a strategy of 'growing your own' is being supported by the social work academy. Newly qualified workers reported positively on the support they had received from the social work academy, and they say that this has helped them develop their skills. However, there remains further work to do to achieve manageable caseloads across the county and provide stability across all teams, which is fundamental to the full implementation of improvement plans.
- Caseloads remain high in some teams and this has had an impact on the timely allocation of work and on the progression of plans. In a small number of cases seen, children had been left in situations where the risks remained unassessed for too long, and there was delay for these children having an appropriate social work response to meet their needs.
- In response to pressures in the short term, additional agency workers and an additional team of workers have been employed to work with the backlog of cases, and this is now much reduced. In total, 19 additional workers have been employed over the last two months. These teams will remain in place until July 2019, when permanent staff are recruited. There is potential for this arrangement to be extended if needed, providing families with some stability.
- In the majority of cases sampled, work was being managed at the right level of intervention. The decisions to escalate concerns or de-escalate to a lower level of intervention were seen to be appropriate. However, there are inconsistencies in how cases are allocated across the county. In some teams, cases are remaining 'open to duty' prior to allocation for a social work assessment. While the cases seen demonstrated only a short delay prior to allocation, in a small number of these cases, the management oversight and direction was not as sharply focused as it needed to be to ensure an appropriately focused social work response, based on the presenting issue.

- Assessment timescales are showing recent signs of improvement, with 85% being completed within 45 working days and an increasing number being completed in less than 30 days. The implementation of reviews at 10 and 25 days is helping to ensure that families receive more timely assessments of their needs and are not subject to statutory involvement longer than is required.
- The quality of assessments is not consistently good, although some good practice was seen. Most are too descriptive, and the analysis of the information is not as sharply focused as it needs to highlight needs and potential risk clearly. The reports to initial child protection conference were of a higher quality in terms of the analysis of risk and the actions required. In some assessments, it was clear that workers are utilising the new social work practice model to assist with their analysis and focus of work with children and families.
- Children's plans are not yet of a good enough quality for all children. The overall aim of the plan and longer-term care planning is not always clearly recorded. The lack of specific actions and timescales for completion means that it is not always clear to families what is expected, and progress can be difficult to review.
- There was evidence of improving multi-agency working, with partner attendance and involvement in meetings having a positive impact in some cases. The outcome of the recent Joint Target Area Inspection has renewed a focus on multi-agency involvement in strategy meetings and child protection processes.
- Appropriately focused direct work is being completed with children to ascertain their wishes and feelings, and inspectors saw that children were being visited regularly and seen alone. Different methods were being used to ascertain children's wishes, which was informing case planning in most cases.
- Social workers report that they receive regular supervision, but this is not consistently recorded or evidenced on children's files. On the whole, staff were positive about working for the service and were looking forward to further changes to the electronic system and the full implementation of the new model of practice. However, understandably for some staff, morale is lower where caseloads remain higher.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning your next inspection or visit. Ofsted will send a copy of this letter to the Department for Education and will publish a copy of this letter on our website on 4 February 2019.

Yours sincerely

Matt Reed  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**