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Dear John

Focused visit to Cumbria local authority children’s services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Cumbria children’s services on 13 August 2019. The inspectors were Shabana Abasi, Her Majesty’s Inspector, and Jan Edwards, Her Majesty’s Inspector.

Inspectors looked at the local authority’s arrangements for the front door. They also considered the effectiveness of strategy discussions and child protection enquiries, the quality of assessments and early help plans, thresholds for the transfer of work to early help services and the response to 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless.

Inspectors also evaluated the effectiveness of performance management, management oversight, supervision and quality assurance.

Inspectors looked at a range of evidence, including children’s case records, case discussions with social workers, managers and partner agencies based within the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information.

Overview

Cumbria children's services were last inspected in November 2017, when the overall effectiveness of services was judged to require improvement to be good. Since the inspection, the local authority has continued to strengthen arrangements for managing referrals and contacts. Senior leaders and managers now have a clear oversight and a better understanding of operational practice at the front door.

Children and their families receive quick and appropriate responses from the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) when enquiries for early help and support and safeguarding concerns are received. Children who need urgent protection receive an effective response, with prompt action taken to reduce risks. Children's assessments are mostly informative. They include children's histories and views, which inform the analysis of risk, but issues of identity are not well considered as part of the overall assessment. The response to young people who present as homeless remains poor, despite this being raised at the last inspection.

The local authority's preferred model of social work is well embedded, and its influence is evident at every level, from the strategic to the operational. It helps to shape the way in which social workers think and practise. It provides a common language for use with other professionals. It is also used positively to engage parents and families, enabling them to share in the evaluation of risks and concerns about their children and supporting them to make the changes needed to improve children's outcomes.

Staff recruitment and retention of frontline workers in some areas of the county continues to be a significant challenge for the local authority. In the last few months, staffing vacancies have resulted in a small number of children not having allocated social workers for a short period of time. The local authority has put in place plans to manage this challenging situation. Senior leaders recognise that workforce instability brings with it a number of vulnerabilities, including inconsistency in the quality of practice, and they are aware of the impact this may have on children. The local authority is actively engaged in a number of initiatives to support social work recruitment and staff development, but at the time of the inspection it was too soon to see any impact of these initiatives on some areas of the service.

Although audits of practice have continued to provide reassurance for senior leaders and managers about the quality of practice across the county, actions recommended from the audits are not always addressed in a timely way.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- the capacity and stability of the workforce in the teams where it is most problematic
- exploration of children's identity needs in assessments
- assessment of the needs of young people who present as homeless, including consideration of whether they need to be looked after by the local authority
- actions resulting from audit are completed in a timely way.

Findings

- The front door provides an easily accessible single point of contact for families and professionals seeking advice and support.
- Thresholds are understood and applied by partner agencies, and this leads to timely referrals to children's social care. Initial screening of contacts is effective, including those screened by the police and health partners. Historic concerns, risk and protective factors are well considered and analysed to inform appropriate threshold decisions. This results in children and families receiving support and help that is commensurate with their level of need.
- Managers have detailed oversight of all contacts and referrals in the MASH. Rationale for decisions are clearly recorded and frequent oversight of work within the MASH throughout the day ensures that decisions are made in a timely way. This means that children and families receive services promptly.
- Social workers in the MASH routinely obtain consent from parents and carers to seek further information from other professionals. When consent is overridden, a clear rationale is provided. Letters confirming the outcome of the referral are sent to referrers but because they are not uploaded onto the case file, there is no record to give evidence that a letter has been sent.
- Decisions to step down cases to early help from the MASH are appropriate. They are informed by an analysis of risks and protective factors and are effectively supported by liaison with the early help officers (EHOs). EHOs provide timely advice to partners undertaking early help assessments and identify appropriate support for children and families.
- When children are referred for a service out of hours, the emergency duty team responds appropriately to reported concerns. This is supported by relevant and good information-sharing between out-of-hours and daytime services.

- The needs of children assessed as being at risk of significant harm are prioritised. Cases are swiftly transferred to district support and protection teams to undertake child protection enquiries.
- Strategy meetings are timely and well attended and are effective forums for sharing multi-agency information. Analysis of information and decision-making is supported by the use of danger statements, safety goals and individual professionals' scaling of risk. Partnership working is a strength. Partners have a good understanding of thresholds and have embraced the local authority's preferred methodology of risk analysis. This contributes to a coherent and joined-up approach to safeguarding children.
- Child protection investigations are thorough and include the views of partners and full details of discussions following visits with children and parents. Information is gathered and well analysed in the form of child and family assessments. Initial child protection conferences are generally convened within the required timescale and are well attended by partners. Meetings clearly record the views of all present, the evidence considered, and the rationale for decisions reached.
- Assessments of children and their families are mainly comprehensive and well written. Social workers use the local authority's preferred model of social work consistently and effectively to consider historical information and explore risk and protective factors. Most assessments demonstrate a real sense of children's lived experiences, although identity needs are not well considered to inform this understanding, and this reduces the quality of the overall assessment.
- Most children's plans are child-centred, and outcome focused. They include clear, timebound actions, and are specific about what needs to change in order to improve children's circumstances.
- 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless or who are at risk of becoming homeless are not provided with a robust social work response. Young people are not afforded the opportunity of a social work assessment in all cases. This was raised as an area of improvement during the last inspection and there is insufficient evidence of progress having been made.
- Children are seen and seen alone. Social workers know children well and, in most cases, records of home visits and sessions with children are comprehensive. Purposeful and creative direct work is undertaken to help children understand their lived experience and to ascertain their wishes and feelings.
- Case summaries are not always updated following changes in the child's circumstances. This means that decisions made by the out-of-hours service are not always based on complete information. In most cases, chronologies are comprehensive and up to date but are not actively used as an effective working tool to increase the understanding of the impact of significant events.

- Capacity issues over the last two to three months in the West district teams have resulted in a small number of children in need not having allocated social workers for short periods of time. Inspectors were concerned about the impact of this situation on those children. The local authority confirmed that they have prioritised child protection and ensured that any child in need of protection had an allocated social worker. Children in need were all seen within the local authority's timescale for visiting, but some children had multiple allocations following workers leaving or going on planned maternity leave. Managers reviewed these cases, and duty social workers have undertaken visits to all the children. However, this does not support children and parents to develop trusting relationships with workers in order to effect positive change. Senior leaders acknowledge the risks this presents and recognise that this is not a sustainable or acceptable position.
- Senior managers are aware of the impact of instability of the workforce on children and have taken a number of actions to address the workforce capacity issues. Senior managers have actively considered proposals to increase capacity, and funding has very recently been agreed for a commissioned service to undertake child in need work for a period of six months from 27 August 2019.
- In most cases, management supervision and oversight is regular and provides appropriate guidance at key points in work with children. The local authority's preferred model of social work is used effectively to support reflective discussion, including group supervision.
- Performance management and quality assurance processes ensure that senior managers are well informed about matters relating to frontline practice. Performance management is well embedded. Performance data is used intelligently to identify areas of practice needing further scrutiny. Audits are now completed in collaboration with social workers and are an accurate reflection of the quality of practice. The auditing process is robust, with checks and balances applied to the judgement through a process of moderation. However, in some cases there is over a month between the audit taking place and a check through moderation, which means that in these cases corrective actions identified are not completed until after the moderation. This is not within a reasonable timescale for children.

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

Yours sincerely

Shabana Abasi
Her Majesty's Inspector