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Dear Jill

Monitoring visit of Sunderland children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Sunderland local authority children's services on 15 and 16 October 2019. This visit was carried out by Her Majesty's Inspectors, Neil Penswick and Peter McEntee.

The visit was the third monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate for overall effectiveness for a second time in July 2018. Following a judgement of inadequate at a previous inspection, in July 2015, Sunderland city council set up Together for Children (TfC) to deliver children's services functions on behalf of the council.

Since the last inspection, there have been some improvements in the management of the public law outline and care proceedings. However, the pace of improvement remains too slow. While clear care and legal pathways are now in place, there are continued weaknesses in management oversight and the quality of social work practice. As a result, some children receive a good and timely response, but too many children experience delays in legal action being taken when it is needed. No children were seen to be at immediate risk of harm during this visit.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the social work response to children who are at significant risk of harm and where legal action is being considered to safeguard them. This included the quality and impact of pre-proceedings activity, decision-making about entering care and the subsequent robustness of children's

social care intervention. Inspectors also looked at management decision-making, oversight and social work supervision.

The visit considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, performance management data, audits and quality assurance reports. In addition, inspectors spoke to a range of staff, including managers, social workers and other practitioners.

Overview

Since the last monitoring visit, significant work has been undertaken to further improve the infrastructure and resources of children's services. There has been additional and much needed financial investment, as well as recruitment to all senior management posts and further recruitment of permanent social workers. A new senior management panel is beginning to improve the consistency of decision-making on whether to initiate the public law outline and care proceedings. New monitoring systems are in place to track social work progress following the decisions of the panel. However, these do not sufficiently focus on ensuring that the subsequent actions are being taken in a timely way. The limited capacity of local authority legal services, multiple changes of social worker and poor management oversight have contributed to drift and delay for children.

There is insufficient focus on early permanence planning for some children. Too much emphasis is placed on rehabilitation to a parent even when this is unlikely and inadvisable given the history. This is leading to further delay for some children in achieving stability. When arrangements are made to look after children under Section 20 of the Children Act 1989, it is not always clear that there have been discussions with parents and that they have given consent for this to occur. These arrangements are currently being reviewed by TfC.

TfC has improved its communications with the council and partner agencies and is more transparent about its progress and where it needs to improve. However, the performance and progress reporting does not always focus on what this means for the children concerned. Quality assurance audits remain poor and gives a misleading picture on the experiences of children, the variability of social work practice and weak management oversight. TfC acknowledges the weaknesses, and a new audit system had been introduced a few days before this visit. However, it is too early to see the progress of this system.

All the social workers and managers who met inspectors reported that Sunderland is an improving place to work. They report that they have confidence in senior managers and in their commitment to continue making improvements in children's social care.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Since the last monitoring visit, there has been an increased focus on improving the management of children's services in Sunderland. There has been an increase in the finances available for TfC from an additional government grant and further investment from the council. There is now a full complement of permanent senior managers, which is the first time this has happened since 2015. A higher number of permanent social workers is reducing the use of short-term staffing. Additional family support workers have been recruited to support social workers in carrying out non-statutory duties. Caseloads have decreased and are more manageable. Strategic partnerships are starting to improve, and new arrangements are being developed following the advice of a Department for Education-appointed improvement adviser. This has also resulted in other agencies being more engaged and supportive of the work to improve children's services in Sunderland.

While there is some early evidence of improvement in the quality of social work practice, inconsistencies and weakness remain. Quality assurance auditing has not yet improved. Inspectors sampled recent case audits. Most failed to identify key weaknesses in the quality of practice or the impact of these deficits on children and families. Where weakness was identified, actions were not identified to remedy issues, and the children's cases were not raised with senior management. This gives TfC and its partners a false impression of the actual quality of frontline practice. TfC is aware of these issues and a new audit system was introduced before this visit, but it is too early to see evidence of its impact.

Decision-making when children need to enter care is improving, but not for all children. A senior management panel now reviews the concerns and identifies the work needed, as well as timescales. For some children, this has resulted in timely actions being taken to ensure that they are protected. However, this is not consistent. Inspectors saw delays in children's cases coming to that panel, subsequent actions not then being taken in a timely manner, and changes being made to authorised plans without any further decision-making meetings. Since April 2019, the police have frequently used their powers of protection to remove children to ensure their safety. Inspectors sampled some of these cases and identified that such actions were appropriate in those circumstances. However, most of the children and their families were open to social care due to complex parenting issues. In some cases, there was clear evidence that TfC could have acted earlier, which would have prevented the incident that led to police protection. Senior managers had not reviewed these cases individually or thematically, and this is a gap in learning to improve practice and children's experiences.

Inspectors sampled some cases where, in partnership with parents, children had been accommodated under section 20 of the Children Act 1989. Discussions with the parents were limited, and, in a small number of cases, there was no evidence that the parents had given consent. Senior managers are currently reviewing all

the cases of children who are in care under this legislation. When very young children enter care, early permanence and twin-tracking are not always considered proactively. In some cases, when it was proved not possible for children to go home, there were critical delays in progressing actions in the courts. There were several babies who had been recently accommodated for their own safety. Care planning focused on work with parents to address long-standing issues, including drug and alcohol dependency, mental health and abusive relationships and where previous children were in the process of being adopted. While this support for parents is positive, there was a lack of wider consideration of the child's needs beyond a return to their parents.

When children do become subject to pre-proceedings, many experience delays in their plans progressing. This is due to high social worker turnover and weaknesses in the operational management oversight in ensuring essential work is done with the requisite urgency. An additional factor results from capacity issues with the local authority legal services. Systems to monitor children's progress are not effective. The current system does not ensure that reviews take place or that the required actions are taken in a timely manner. Letters sent as part of the public law outline process vary in quality. Letters do not specify well enough what needs to be done to improve the child's circumstances, by who and when, what support is needed and what further actions may occur if progress is not achieved.

Feedback received from the Child and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS) is that there have been some improvements in proceedings work. However, there remain issues in some cases with the timeliness of work pre-proceedings, the quality of the social work and the quality of applications to the court. CAFCASS gave positive feedback about the willingness of TfC senior managers to talk to partners agencies and address practice deficits.

Supervision of social workers remains inconsistent. Most social workers are receiving monthly supervision, although, for some, there have been gaps of several months between sessions. The quality of supervision varies, with some supervision failing to address weaknesses in practice and lacking in specificity about what actions need to be taken and within what timescales in order to drive progress in children's plans.

All the workers who met inspectors were very positive about working for Sunderland and about the changes that have been happening since the last monitoring visit. Those who had recently been recruited by TfC described this as a good career move to a highly supportive environment. Staff know the children well and spoke with enthusiasm about their work. They spoke about the increased opportunities to work directly with children and parents and how they are supported to utilise many and varied social work tools to help improve children's lives.

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

Yours sincerely

Neil Penswick
Her Majesty's Inspector