

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231
Textphone 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/ofsted



5 March 2020

Jill Colbert
Chief Executive
Together for Children
Sunderland
Sandhill Centre
Grindon Lane
Sunderland
SR3 4EN

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 11 and 12 February 2020. This visit was carried out by Her Majesty's Inspectors, Neil Penswick and Matthew Reed.

The visit was the fourth 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 improvements made to the services for children in care in need of permanence. Inspectors saw better social work improving the experiences of children and young people in care. Senior management oversight has considerably improved since the last monitoring visit, and this has further ensured that children in care progress to permanence promptly.

The recognition of safeguarding issues in the children with disabilities team is weak, and despite managers' awareness of the issues, improvements have been too slow. No children were seen to be at immediate risk of harm during this visit.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made to the social work support for children in care, including children with disabilities. Due to concerns identified by the local authority prior to the visit, inspectors also looked at the response to child protection

concerns for disabled children in care. They also looked at management decision-making, the oversight provided by local authority children in care panels and the supervision provided to social workers.

A range of evidence was considered during the visit, 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. They met with a group of children in care and care leavers, who shared their experiences.

Overview

Since the last monitoring visit, TfC have continued the improvements to ensuring that permanent, experienced staff and management are in place. Quality assurance arrangements are also improving. Reduced caseloads are enabling social workers to carry out more direct work with children, including life-story work. All the workers who met inspectors reported positively about working in Sunderland.

Senior management oversight was much more evident during this visit. Senior managers know their services well and can describe the strengths of the social work practice as well as the weaknesses, which they are addressing. There are accurate tracking arrangements to monitor the progress of children in care. Progress to achieve permanence is an evident strength of the new systems. However, management oversight on the rationale for decision-making is not consistently recorded. The Department for Education (DfE) has increased their assistance to the senior managers, and this is supporting improvements.

Social workers know their children well. Assessments are mainly thorough. Plans cover all the children's needs well, including contact with their families and supporting their hobbies and interests. The views of children are sought and are evident in records. Regular child-looked-after reviews monitor children's progress. Although attendance at the meetings by children is low, independent reviewing officers (IROs) visit children before reviews to provide independent insight into their needs and progress, and gather children's views.

Children in care live in placements that meet their needs. There is increased support for connected carers and to support special guardianship arrangements. Children who met inspectors reported positively about their roles in the children's change councils and the support they received from TfC senior managers.

Senior managers reported to inspectors that there were weaknesses with the children with disability services at the start of the visit. Inspectors found that, while there is some good work, there is insufficient focus on risk. While no child was found to be unsafe, basic safeguarding procedures have not always been followed. Senior managers have appointed an additional team manager and could evidence a plan to address the weaknesses.

Findings and evaluation of progress

Since the last monitoring visit, in October 2019, the DfE have continued to support further improvements made in the wider strategic management and partnership arrangements. An improvement board, chaired by a highly experienced improvement adviser, has very recently started to meet. Initial feedback from senior managers is that this is providing helpful support to the TfC management team.

TfC senior managers have an accurate understanding of their service, including areas for continued development. Senior managers have continued to focus on the recruitment and retention of managers and staff across their services. This has resulted in a permanent senior management team employed by TfC and a reduced use of short-term social work staff. There are a further 22 newly qualified social workers who are employed over and above the agreed workforce numbers. This has resulted in caseloads further reducing. On average, frontline social workers are supporting 17 children and young people. This is giving workers more time to do direct work with children and their families and to progress the plans to improve their lives. All the social workers who met inspectors reported positively on the support they receive from TfC.

Supervision is regular and, in the main, is held monthly. Improvements have been made since the previous Ofsted visit to make sure that supervision is more reflective, to better meet the needs of the social workers and to address the progress of children's plans. However, there remains too much variability in how this is recorded.

External consultants have been training managers in auditing case files, and a new audit template has been introduced which focuses appropriately on children's experiences. As a result, over the last month there has been a reduction in the audits undertaken. Those seen by inspectors were of a much better quality than on previous monitoring visits, with clear recommendations, timescales for actions to be achieved and responsible people identified.

Permanence planning and the prompt progression of this are improving. At the last monitoring visit, inspectors saw that children in care panels had been introduced to provide senior management oversight and ensure that there has been progress made in implementing plans for children in care. Since the last visit, the director of children's services and director of children's social care for TfC have reviewed all the children in care proceedings and identified actions where needed. Tracking arrangements are in place for children in care proceedings, children looked after under Section 20, and children subject to the public law outline. Further work is ongoing to create a single tracking system. Prior to a child coming into care, or proceedings being initiated, all children's cases are reviewed by a senior management-led legal gateway meeting. This work is monitored to ensure that there is timely progress. However, the recording of the meetings does not always detail the reason for decisions taken.

The numbers of children in care have reduced because there are more robust arrangements and support to families to appropriately divert children from coming into care. Additional support for connected carers and special guardianship has also resulted in children moving to permanence arrangements promptly.

There has been a recent update to the computer information system. The document templates now use the social work model of social work practice that TfC has introduced. Inspectors saw more use of this model in social work practice and recording, but this it is not yet fully embedded.

In the social work teams visited by inspectors, social workers knew the children in care on their caseloads very well and could give a clear overview of their current situation and future plans. They spoke enthusiastically about the children and the work they were undertaking. Assessments are mainly of a good quality and are detailed, providing an overview of the history, current situation and reason for involvement. Analysis and rationale for future actions are clear. A range of assessments were seen by inspectors. All were of a good standard, demonstrating an understanding of the child's needs and future services required.

Senior managers continue to address some legacy issues, where children have experienced drift and delay in their plans progressing. More recent practice has improved. Children who had come into care recently had done so appropriately and in a timely manner. In all the cases seen by inspectors, children were living in placements that met their needs. Children were settled in foster or residential homes where they had good relationships with their carers.

Children are seen regularly and in line with their needs. Their views are captured and recorded well, and direct work is completed wherever needed and incorporated into wider care planning. Children are assisted to understand their life histories and they have access to life-story work or books. This is tailored to the children's level of understanding and is re-visited later if required. Children are supported well to continue their hobbies and leisure interests, for instance to attend activities at Sunderland football club.

Looked after reviews are held promptly and consider well all the needs of the children, including family time with those closest to them. Contact with their birth family is promoted and supported when it is in children's best interests to ensure that relationships continue wherever possible. In all the children's cases seen, decisions to maintain, reduce or stop family contact were clear and child focused. Attendance of children at their reviews is infrequent. However, independent reviewing officers (IROs) do see them in between reviews to enable them to understand their views and needs. Multi-agency care planning meetings take place in between reviews to consider the child's plan and actions needed. However, these do not always occur as often as planned. The recording of these meeting does not always give a detailed overview of the discussion.

Inspectors saw much improved work that met the needs of specific groups of children in care. This includes: support to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children,

the pre-birth response where previous children had been removed, fostering to adopt arrangements and supporting children to return to their family safely.

Inspectors met a group of young people representing the two children's change councils (for 10–15 and over-16-year-olds). The young people spoke about the work they have been doing, both locally and regionally, to raise the profile of children in care and care leavers. They reported that, as a result of some of their work, changes have been made and they felt listened to by managers. For instance, the term 'contact' has been changed to 'family time' and they have been able to change the layout and decor of the family time room. The children have been involved in recruiting staff and participating in training for newly qualified social workers to give the perspective of children who have been in care. The children had a range of experiences of being in care, but were generally very positive about the support they received.

Inspectors also looked at the range of support provided to children with disabilities. Social workers know their children well and can clearly articulate their needs and plans. This is reflected in detailed assessments that provide a clear overview of the children's needs and additional support requirements. Disability needs are very well identified and are at the centre of the ongoing work. However, there is some variability in identifying and addressing the needs of all the family members, particularly those without a disability. Transitions to adult services are planned and are put in place as the young people reach 18. Pathway plans are detailed, but they are not user-friendly for children with additional needs and communication issues.

Safeguarding procedures are not being consistently followed in the children with disabilities team. Although concerns are being responded to by social workers, they have not always followed safeguarding procedures and carried out the appropriate assessments to inform the decision-making process. This includes not having conversations with the Northumbria police about child protection issues and not informing the designated officer and Ofsted when there were concerns about the care of children at children's homes. While child protection investigations have been undertaken in the team over the last six months, this has not happened in all circumstances where there have been safeguarding concerns. While children have received support, the appropriate safeguarding procedures have not always been followed.

Supervision and management oversight in this team is inconsistent, and not of a consistent good quality. A further team manager has recently been appointed to provide additional management and supervisory support to staff. There is evidence of management and IRO oversight, but this is not addressing the weaknesses in relation to safeguarding responses. Senior managers have been aware of the issues in the team and have shared these with the inspectors. They have also shared their plans to improve the service and children's experiences. A team improvement plan is in place to address inconsistencies in practice and recording, including safeguarding practice.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you and your staff for your positive engagement with this monitoring visit

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