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Dear Sally

Focused visit to Hartlepool Borough children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Hartlepool Borough children's services on 4 and 5 March 2020. The visit was carried out by Her Majesty's Inspector, Lisa Summers and Her Majesty's Inspector, Nick Stacey.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need, and children 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

Hartlepool's children services were last inspected in July 2018, when overall effectiveness was judged to be good. Since then, the strong and stable senior management team has continued to improve the quality of social work practice for children who are subject to child in need and child protection plans. This is in spite of increasing demand for services.

Relationship-based practice is a service priority. Senior managers have created additional capacity to help maintain manageable caseloads to enable social workers

to deliver high-quality direct work with children and their families. As a result, children's circumstances are improving.

Senior managers invest significant effort in understanding the quality of frontline practice. They use this information very effectively to identify and shape improvement activity and influence local partnership priorities. They do this, for example, by developing the multi-agency community support team as a new way of working to help to meet the distinct needs of children and families in Hartlepool.

Senior leaders reported openly and accurately key service strengths and areas they continue to refine. These include the quality of written plans, the frequency of social work supervision, and some quality assurance systems. Despite strong partnerships, key professionals do not always attend children's review meetings. Timely authoritative action is not always taken to escalate into pre-proceedings, leaving a small number of children in neglectful situations for too long.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The frequency of formal supervision to match the level of risk to children in line with the local authority's expected practice standards.
- The timeliness of escalation decisions into pre-proceedings.

Findings

The quality and impact of social work practice where children are subject to child in need and child protection planning is effective. Practice has continued to improve since the last inspection, despite increasing demands on frontline services. The small size of the local authority means that managers and social workers know agency partners and services well, and they work together effectively. As a result, children and families access a broad range of timely help and support with ease. Domestic abuse is a significant feature in Hartlepool, and social workers diligently work to engage vulnerable, and some reluctant, families in specialist services. Dedicated family support workers and the intensive response team (IRT) help to deliver bespoke packages of support. As a result, many children's lives are improving.

The importance of developing trusting relationships with children and families is recognised and promoted through increased investment in additional workforce capacity. The purposeful 'one worker' model ensures that families do not have to tell their stories multiple times, because wherever possible the social worker will remain the same worker with the family. Children are seen regularly by social workers who know them very well, although the quality of this work is not always reflected as well as it could be in children's records. Social workers use skill and consideration in eliciting children's views and wishes and do this effectively, using a range of direct work tools. This allows assessments to consider children's worries, and, when appropriate, this shapes their plans. Inspectors saw excellent examples of highly effective direct work, particularly in the disabled children's team.

Senior managers use their knowledge of their children and families well to develop new approaches to addressing risks to children who are experiencing neglect. Local partnerships have been cultivated to prioritise the development of a new team that is focused on addressing key risk factors such as parental substance misuse, domestic abuse, and building resilience, to maintain long-term safe care through the very recently established multi-agency community support team. Despite this being in its infancy, there are early signs of swifter access to adult services.

Since the last inspection, the quality and timeliness of assessments have improved. Assessments use wide sources of multi-agency information and family history to analyse and understand risks and protective factors, which are well articulated through clear analysis. The needs of individual children in the family are thoroughly considered, and information from members of the wider family is sought when they play a caring role for the children.

Senior managers have focused their efforts on improving the quality of children's plans. They recognise that there is more work to do and this is ongoing. Their efforts are impeded due to the limitations of their electronic case file system. Despite this, some more recent plans are improving in quality, identifying actions to be taken and detailing concerns. This is helping parents to better understand the local authority's worries. While improvements are being made, some plans do not always reflect the richness of work being undertaken. Some continue to be too lengthy, focusing on actions rather than outcomes, and they lack timescales to inject pace and tighten accountability.

The majority of children benefit from timely and regular reviews through child protection conferences, core groups and child in need review meetings. Risks to children are routinely considered, progress against key actions is monitored and, where needed, further actions are identified. However, not all review minutes sufficiently detail the effectiveness of interventions or the impact on children's lives. In the small number of cases seen during this visit, key professionals do not always attend these meetings. This limits information-sharing and shared decision-making. Senior managers have firm plans in place to strengthen the effectiveness of child protection conferences and child in need reviews.

When children's circumstances are not improving, in a very small number of cases seen timely authoritative action is not always taken to escalate into pre-proceedings. Inspectors identified two families for whom this should have escalated sooner, and where children had been left in situations of ongoing neglect for too long. Once children enter Public Law Outline, the vast majority of children are regularly reviewed to avoid drift. Tracking mechanisms for children in pre-proceedings do not identify key milestones to minimise potential delay.

Senior managers regard the workforce to be their greatest asset. Social workers highly value the working culture, and some keenly sought to work for the local authority. Managers energetically prioritise social workers' health and well-being by

ensuring that they have protected time to take breaks. High-quality practice is actively promoted, celebrated and shared through weekly signs of safety briefings. This is improving the quality and consistency of core social work practice. The introduction of assistant team managers creates career pathways to support career progression. As a result, the retention and recruitment of social workers is highly effective.

All social workers spoken to during the visit are overwhelmingly positive about working for Hartlepool, reporting that they feel valued and supported, with strong and regular management and peer support. Small teams encourage constructive interdependence between social workers and managers in which discussions, monitoring and decision-making for children are ongoing and frequent. Senior managers recognise that the frequency of some formal supervision is not regular enough to match the level of threshold of risk as defined by the local authority's standards of practice. When children's circumstances are reviewed through formal supervision, this is very thorough; actions are defined, but there are no timescales for completion.

Senior managers have a clear understanding of the quality of frontline practice. Quality assurance mechanisms are broad, including dedicated practice weeks involving the collation of feedback from children, parents and carers, and direct observations of practice. Collaborative auditing by managers, alongside social workers, takes into account their thoughts and reflections to enrich practice, and demonstrates a participative learning culture. Auditing has been strengthened since the last inspection through dedicated audit training and the introduction of moderation processes. Senior managers recognise that while audits evaluate current practice well, they require further refinement to demonstrate more curiosity when children experience repeated or long-term social work interventions to support wider learning.

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

Yours sincerely

Lisa Summers
Her Majesty's Inspector