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11 May 2021

Jill Colbert  
Director of Children's Services  
and Chief Executive  
Together for Children  
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Dear Ms Colbert

### **Focused visit to Sunderland children's services**

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic.

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Sunderland local authority children's services on 24 and 25 March 2021. The visit was carried out by Her Majesty's Inspectors Neil Penswick, Jan Edwards, Brenda McLaughlin, Victoria Horsefield and Jon Bowman.

The methodology for this visit was in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. However, the delivery model was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 context. This visit was carried out fully by remote means. The inspectors used video calls for discussions with local authority staff, managers and leaders. The lead inspector and the director of children's services agreed arrangements to deliver this visit effectively while working within national and local guidelines for responding to COVID-19.

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

The areas for improvement continue to be those that were identified at the ILACS inspection in July 2018. Progress is evident in key areas.

## Findings

- Over the past 12 months, Sunderland has experienced continual high rates of COVID-19. However, apart from a brief period at the start of the first national lockdown when visits by social workers to children and their families were risk assessed, Together for Children (TfC) has provided face-to-face services throughout the pandemic in order to continue supporting the most vulnerable children in the city.
- Following two inspection judgements of inadequate, Sunderland City Council set up TfC in 2017 to deliver children's services functions on its behalf. Since the start of the pandemic, senior managers have steadfastly continued their focus on improving services. They have further developed their disabled children's team, established a new pre-birth team and opened two new residential centres to better respond to the needs of children locally.
- Management oversight of children's services has been tightened through the strengthening of a range of manager-led panels and through the ongoing roll-out of a nationally recognised model of social work practice. Despite the personal and professional pressures they had experienced as a result of the pandemic, all the staff who spoke to inspectors were enthusiastic about working for TfC and were highly positive about the support, training and development opportunities that continued to be provided to them over the past year.
- Leaders and managers from TfC and Sunderland City Council were proactive in working with schools during the pandemic. A range of actions were taken to better protect children and promote their attendance, including developing a joint risk assessment to identify and better monitor and support vulnerable children. Clear processes are in place to identify and monitor electively home-educated children, including those who are most vulnerable. Resources have been increased in this area in response to the rising demand. There has been a significant increase in children missing education since schools reopened to all children in September 2020. Following concerted efforts, the local authority is aware of the whereabouts of all these children and, where appropriate, welfare checks and visits have been undertaken.
- TfC performance data is of a high quality and gives managers an excellent knowledge base to enable them to understand and further develop their services. There is also a considerable programme of quality assurance and auditing. However, the value of this for the organisation is more limited due to the inconsistent approach to auditing by the social work managers undertaking this work. Although managerial oversight is improving, it remains too variable. This was evident in the variations in the oversight provided in one-to-one supervision and in how managers were recording their guidance to social workers on various forms.
- The Integrated Contact and Referral Team provides a thorough screening of referrals of children received from the public and other agencies. Most triaging is timely, with clear management oversight and effective use of agency and historical information. The children at highest risk are responded to highly

effectively. However, in lower-risk cases, inspectors found that some decisions were being made based on too-limited information in order to ensure that work was completed within 24 hours. In these cases, there is too much variability in the recording, and the key issues for the children are not always sufficiently clear.

- Child protection strategy discussions are timely and well attended by an appropriate range of agencies, with good information-sharing and recording of the meetings. The rationale for next steps is clearly recorded and a shared view of risk is taken through a scaling process. Immediate safety planning is robust. There is effective decision-making when children's cases are being stepped up or down to early help.
- Decision-making in relation to whether assessments are needed is inconsistent. Inspectors saw assessments that had been undertaken unnecessarily. Assessment quality is also inconsistent. Some are well written and comprehensive, and others lack analytical depth and do not assist in identifying the most appropriate services for the children. Children's views are recorded, but this is not always focused well enough on the issues being considered.
- Most of the child protection work seen during the visit is strong. This is underpinned by the commitment of the partner agencies working alongside social workers to ensure that children are better protected. However, there is variability in the quality of some child protection planning due to insufficiently specific plans and a lack of focus by TfC staff and other professionals on ensuring that the plans are being progressed.
- The risks to children from criminal and sexual exploitation are confidently managed and overseen by the Missing, Slavery, Exploitation and Trafficked operational group, which provides additional scrutiny and challenge to practice. Enhanced intelligence-sharing has influenced both service development and individual safeguarding for children, identification of risk and disruption activity. When children go missing from home and care, a newly commissioned team now provides a consistent worker, who is able to develop a relationship with the child to support participation in their return home interviews.
- When progress has stalled in child protection work, timely action is taken to enter into pre-proceedings and, when appropriate, care proceedings are issued. There is clear managerial oversight at significant decision-making points, including that of senior management. The pre-proceedings panel has been strengthened and regularly reviews the cases and the actions taken to ensure that any delays are responded to. A legal proceedings tracker is being refined to performance-manage practice more effectively. The letters before proceedings are not sufficiently explicit about what the expectation is of parents and in what timescale.
- Inspectors saw good work and much-improved forward planning and identification of risk by the new pre-birth team and through family network meetings. This reflected the positive comments made by the judiciary and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service in describing to inspectors the improved work they see from Sunderland.

- Decisions to bring children into care are appropriate. However, some decisions are made in an emergency and are not timely enough or planned effectively enough to respond to the known escalating risks while children remain at home. Several of the children whose cases inspectors reviewed would have benefited from being in care sooner.
- The support provided to 'cared for children' (as children in care are known in Sunderland) is, in the main, good. Creative efforts are made to ensure that children benefit from planned, safe family time with their parents and people who are important to them. These arrangements have been maintained, and often increased, during the pandemic, which has helped to alleviate children's anxiety about the impact of COVID-19 on their birth families. Most cared for children were supported to attend school throughout the lockdowns, providing them with routine and stability. Personal education plans were put in place in a timely way for children, including those new to care. These have been adapted to have a better focus on children's well-being, reflecting concerns heightened by the pandemic.
- Cared for children have been able to access online support for mental health, and an organisation has been commissioned to provide support to 'care experienced' children (as care leavers are known in Sunderland). Additional access to support for emotional and mental health issues is being developed, as some children have waited too long for access to support when they have needed it. Consideration and understanding of the trauma children have endured prior to coming into care are not always sufficient and are too often superficial. Children have access to regular statutory health assessments, including sexual health clinics. They are registered with GPs, and specialist nurses provide support. Gaps in dental checks, as a result of COVID-19 restrictions under the lockdowns, were evident.
- Planned matching decisions are made with a good consideration of the child's needs. Management-level panels consider the need for a placement, along with the social worker, and decisions are linked to commissioners of those services. Inspectors saw that children were being consulted about placements and were visiting before a decision was made. However, too many children who enter care in an emergency move quickly and not always to a settled placement.
- Care experienced young people have had regular contact with their personal advisers, including face-to-face visits, throughout the pandemic. The Next Steps team quickly adapted to become a virtual service to ensure that young people had ready access to support. This included well-being packs, food parcels, payment cards and face-to-face isolation sessions being offered, with a focus on emotional well-being.
- Virtual school staff have been persistent in supporting care experienced young people to attain their education, employment or training goals, including young people with more complex needs. However, a high proportion remain not in education, employment or training. Plans are in place to better coordinate the work of the virtual school post-16 workers, the dedicated education, employment

and training careers adviser and the Next Steps team, so that work in this area is more effective.

- Inspectors met a number of the care experienced young people who are part of the Change Council. They described vividly the work they are doing and how they make an important contribution to helping develop services to support other young people. Among their successes has been their successful campaigning to get social workers, managers and others to use language that they understand and is non-stigmatising. They reported that they have experienced a much-enhanced service and spoke positively about the commitment by Sunderland City Council and TfC to further improve.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning your next inspection or visit. We will share the content of this letter with the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Neil Penswick  
Her Majesty's Inspector