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Dear Caroline,

Focused visit to Gateshead children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Gateshead children's services on 22 to 23 September 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Brenda McLaughlin, Vicky Metherringham and Louise Walker (HMI designate).

Inspectors evaluated the quality of help and protection provided to vulnerable children and their families in the 'front door' integrated referral team (IRT) and in the assessment and intervention team (AIT). They met with social workers and their managers and looked in detail at children's records. In addition, inspectors appraised the quality and impact of the local authority's performance management and audit arrangements.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

Headline findings

Gateshead's highly skilled, committed and caring social workers and their managers in the front door teams provide sensitive, innovative child-centred help and protection to most children seen during the visit. Continuously strong, ambitious and effective senior leadership has resulted in sustained improvements. The well-respected and experienced director of children's services (DCS), together with her senior team, has created a culture where doing the right thing to help children and their families is embedded across teams.

Closely aligned, mature professional partnerships work together effectively to safeguard children from harm. Thresholds are understood well, and scrutinised frequently. There is consistent and commendable evidence of continuous innovation and improvement during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic. Senior leaders are

fittingly proud of their staff's commitment and determination throughout this period to see vulnerable children and their families face to face. Staff report that they feel valued in their work and professional development and that their personal well-being is prioritised.

Performance management is effective. Leaders are intending to take action to strengthen their audit function by including the views of children and parents. Managers' inconsistent evaluation in supervision and lack of direction around alternative ways of working, along with an absence of contingency planning, contribute to delay for a small number of children.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The quality and impact of supervision and contingency planning for children in need.
- The routine inclusion of the views of children and their families in audits.

Main findings

Contact and referrals for children in need or at risk of harm are managed effectively in the IRT. Social workers and managers make prompt, well-informed decisions about what help and protection are required.

Decisions by managers to step up and down to early help services are appropriate. Partner agencies have a shared understanding of thresholds, augmented by the daily multi-agency triage meeting, which includes the early help service. Proportionate checks are undertaken with professionals; they work closely together and collaborate well. As a result, most children and families get the right level of help and protection at the right time, delivered by very committed and skilled professionals. This is making a difference to their day-to-day lives and is keeping them safer. Parental consent to share information is sought routinely, or appropriately overridden if required.

Responses to children at risk of harm are timely and effective. Visits are carried out swiftly by IRT staff when they are concerned about children's immediate welfare, and this is a real strength. Multi-agency child protection strategy meetings are used constructively to share information about children, leading to well-informed decisions about what needs to happen next to protect them from harm. Inspectors agree with a recent independent audit of strategy meetings and child protection enquiries, which concluded that children and their families receive a proportionate response.

Most assessments of vulnerable children are comprehensive and analytical. They demonstrate effective and thoughtful engagement with families and a good understanding of children's needs. They are thorough and clearly reflect the child's voice and experiences. However, some are not updated regularly.

Diligent work by staff across all front door teams, including the out of hours service, demonstrates a resolute focus on understanding the impact of domestic abuse, parental substance misuse, and poor mental health and neglect. Competent examples were seen of social workers using an array of direct-work tools to evaluate how these and other vulnerabilities interact with the ability of parents to provide stable, safe and consistent care for their children.

Risks and strengths are identified and carefully analysed, and consistently informed by the family's previous history. The child's views and lived experiences are central to most decisions, plans and planning. Effective, proportionate action is taken, protecting children from harm. Respectful inclusion of parental and extended family members' views during assessments is recorded well but parental needs do not eclipse those of children. Difficult and honest conversations are conducted appropriately, resulting in many parents working collaboratively and openly with social workers. Good-quality children-in-need plans are evident, but a minority of children remain on these plans too long without the requisite review.

Management direction is clearly articulated on children's records in the IRT. Supervision in the AIT is regular but recording by managers is perfunctory and lacks analysis and clarity on what needs to happen next. It does not include an ongoing evaluation of whether timely progress is being made. Contingency thinking and planning are limited, leading to delay for a small number of children. Regular management reviews of children's progress at 10 and 28 days are conducted. However, children in need whose assessments remain ongoing do not benefit from similar scrutiny beyond 28 days.

Leaders have recognised the need to strengthen services and systems to monitor and assess the impact of work with vulnerable adolescents, those missing from home and children at risk of exploitation. Action to appoint dedicated specialist staff is beginning to make a difference, but the alignment of services and systems to monitor and assess the impact of this work is not yet fully embedded to ensure that risks to children are fully understood and addressed quickly.

Performance management is rigorous. Leaders have an accurate grip on frontline practice, supported by reliable real-time data. Leaders at all levels regularly investigate variances and emerging concerns in monthly performance clinics, chaired by the deputy strategic director. For example, a monthly missing-from-care meeting led by the senior management team identified that the number of children engaging in their missing-from-care interviews was not good enough. Consequently, a dedicated missing-from-care coordinator post has been created and this is beginning to make a substantial difference.

Senior leaders 'paused' routine audits in February 2021 due to the increase in referrals and pressures on team managers and staff as a result of the pandemic. However, they have continued to carry out thematic audits. Auditors focus on measuring the quality of the work and whether children are being helped and

safeguarded. Leaders are intending to take action to include the views of children and their parents during audits.

The DCS has an accurate view of the service she leads and shows exceptionally strong, stable leadership and commitment to continued improvement, working adroitly to progress the small number of areas for improvement that remain. There is no complacency. For example, despite the unprecedented challenges posed by the pandemic, a strong culture of outward-looking, continuous learning and accountability meant that Gateshead continued to innovate, and appoint more staff to take forward the new initiatives. They pioneered the successful development of a new social workers in schools team across six secondary schools, leading to earlier intervention and prevention of harm to children. This initiative is now being extended to include more schools. In addition, an independently commissioned peer review of the complex children-in-need team is leading to an enhanced service to children at risk of coming into care.

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

Yours sincerely

Brenda McLaughlin
Her Majesty's Inspector