

31 January 2022

Niki Clemo  
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Dear Niki

### **Monitoring visit to Stoke-on-Trent children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Stoke-on-Trent children's services on 14 and 15 December 2021. This was the fifth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in March 2019. Her Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Andrew Waugh and John Roughton.

### **Areas covered by the visit**

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the following areas of concern identified at the last inspection:

- The effectiveness of the 'front door' arrangements.
- The application of thresholds and the quality of strategy meetings and child protection enquiries.

This visit was carried out 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. The lead inspector and director of children's services agreed arrangements to deliver this visit effectively while working within national and local guidelines for responding to COVID-19. The visit was carried out on site, with inspectors using video calls to talk to local authority staff and partners when they were unable to be in the office.

### **Headline findings**

The local authority has made discernible progress and improvement in the quality of practice for children and families in receipt of services at the front door since the inspection in March 2019. There is a renewed focus on threshold application, management oversight and decision-making. The majority of children and families in Stoke-on-Trent receive support and services that are appropriate to their level of need. The quality assurance framework has been further enhanced and provides managers with a clear understanding of practice. Leaders and politicians have

worked hard to develop positive working relationships with partners. They have a good understanding of the service's strengths and areas for improvement.

### **Findings and evaluation of progress**

Despite the ongoing challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, the local authority and its partners have maintained a focus on delivering services to the most vulnerable children and families. Social workers' safety and well-being is a priority for senior managers and staff confirm they are well supported by their managers.

Since February 2021, the local authority has operated a new multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) model, with one access point for receiving and processing information. There is an emphasis on conversations between professionals, with some contacts being received through written referrals. Through the discussions, some partners believe that the MASH is more responsive to their concerns. There is a culture of constructive conversations which ensure children receive the right levels of support. Children and families benefit from social workers responding to new contacts promptly within prescribed timescales. Managers provide oversight to ensure no children are left in situations of risk for too long.

Consent is, in most cases, appropriately obtained from families by the referrer. When consent is not obtained, social workers do not accept the information and request the referrer has further discussions with the family. For those children where there are safeguarding concerns, consent is rightly overridden with a supporting rationale for doing so, which is recorded.

Partners and, when appropriate, members of the public are advised of the outcome of their referrals and the actions agreed. When the outcome of a contact for a child is advice or information, the emphasis is placed on the referring professional to inform the family that advice has been sought from children's social care.

Since the previous inspection, risks to children are better understood by social workers as they give greater consideration to the impact of family histories on current concerns. Partner agency checks are undertaken to establish a holistic view of children's circumstances. Social workers analyse risks and needs for children effectively and, in most cases, apply the right level of threshold.

Children who experience domestic abuse within their family do not always receive a timely service. For some children, there is delay by the police in reporting incidents to the front door, which potentially leaves children in unsafe situations for too long. Senior leaders are aware of this issue and are proactively addressing this with the police.

Children and families benefit from an early help manager in the MASH, to ensure that thorough consideration is being given to early help support and the options for potential services from within the early help offer. However, when stepped down,

initial actions suggested by the social worker are not routinely progressed quickly enough. In addition, when work needs to be undertaken in parallel with an assessment, family support workers are not given clear guidance of the work needed. This is a missed opportunity for children and families to receive services early to address identified needs.

Contacts that are processed to referral or that require a strategy meeting receive effective management oversight. Team managers assure the quality of contacts through dip sampling and supervision to ensure the application of correct thresholds and the right decision-making for children.

Strategy meetings are mostly held promptly, with consistently strong attendance from partners. Strategy meetings use information including family history to appropriately reflect the risks to children. The majority of actions are clear and focused on immediate protection. Consideration is also given to the protection of other children in the household or in contact with the family. Where appropriate, actions lead to swift joint investigations with the police.

The emergency duty team communicates effectively with the local authority and partners. Contacts to the service are mostly responded to appropriately. However, in some cases, there is a lack of professional curiosity when children go missing. When there are clear safeguarding concerns, workers respond appropriately to ensure children are better protected. The quality of recording by emergency duty team workers in children's records and of strategy meetings is too variable. Senior leaders and managers are aware of the shortfalls in practice, and they have a project plan in place to address this.

Children's assessments are variable in quality. Some children and families benefit from detailed assessments that address their needs. Information from partners, family histories and children's and families' views lead to effective analysis of needs and risk. Social workers understand culture and identity and explore children's experiences through direct work. The resulting recommendations and actions address the needs of children, as well as reducing risks. Management oversight is well considered and informs next steps. Some assessments are not as effective due to the lack of information and insufficient analysis to address the needs of children.

Since the last inspection, senior managers have strengthened the quality assurance framework, enabling them to have a clear line of sight on social work practice. Team managers regularly dip sample the quality of work to ensure thresholds and decision-making are applied effectively for children. Audits are moderated with a balance between process and quality of practice. However, outcomes and actions are not consistently shared with workers and therefore audits do not always have an impact on improving outcomes for children.

Senior leaders and managers have been tenacious in the recruitment and retention of staff. Since March 2021, 77 new social workers have been recruited to the service.

This has had a significant impact on workforce stability, reducing the number of vacancies and agency staff by over 50%. This means that children and families experience fewer changes of worker. Children are able to develop more meaningful relations with workers which helps them to improve their experiences and progress.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Waugh  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**