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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 9 and 10 March 2022. This was the sixth and final monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in March 2019. Her Majesty's inspectors for this visit were Andrew Waugh and Tom Anthony.

Areas covered by the visit

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

- The effectiveness of interventions for children subject to child in need and child protection plans.
- The effectiveness of children subject to pre-proceedings under the Public Law Outline (PLO).

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 interviewing social workers and managers under local guidelines.

Headline findings

Since the last inspection, the local authority has improved the quality of practice for children subject to child in need and child protection plans. Similarly, the work for children in PLO has improved. The majority of children and families in Stoke-on-Trent receive services that are appropriate to their levels of risk and needs. During our visit, we did not see any children at immediate risk of harm. Senior leaders and managers have a line of sight on practice, through a firmly embedded quality assurance framework. There is inconsistency in the quality of social work practice. Workforce stability is fragile due to staff sickness due to COVID-19 and the churn of

agency social workers. As a result, caseloads have increased and this has had a detrimental impact on some social work practice.

Findings and evaluation of progress

The local authority and its partners maintain a focus on delivering services for the most vulnerable children and families, despite the continued challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Senior managers prioritise the safety and well-being of staff.

Social workers know their children well. Most social workers develop effective relationships with parents, enabling them to understand concerns and what needs to change. Where relationships are more challenging to develop, social workers persist, and ensure that they maintain a focus on children. Children are seen regularly by social workers who spend time and effort building relationships with them. The majority of visits are purposeful and social workers have meaningful discussions with children to understand their wishes and feelings. Where children are younger, social workers use observation well to understand their attachment with parents.

Social workers understand and embrace the model of relationship-based practice, which is reflected in assessments. The majority of children benefit from assessments that are detailed, with clear evaluation of strengths and risks leading to appropriate recommendations for next steps. Information from partners is used effectively to inform analysis. For most children, family history, and how this affects current circumstances is well understood. Social workers have a clear understanding of children's experiences and how risks or concerns affect their development. There is clear evidence that the views of children and adults are threaded throughout assessments.

However, some children's assessments are not updated to fully understand the impact of significant changes in their lives or changes in family relationships. This means the potential risks to some children may not be fully recognised in plans.

Disabled children and their families are supported by specialist workers who have the time and expertise to understand their needs and build trusting relationships. Children's needs are well assessed, using a range of information alongside family histories, which results in thorough analysis and recommendations. Advocacy is provided to most disabled children, some as young as 4 years old, to enhance their engagement and representation.

Strong multi-agency engagement at child in need reviews and core group meetings mean that children benefit from well-considered and coordinated support to drive plans forward. Children's records show detailed, comprehensive discussions with parents about concerns and what needs to happen next. A developing family group conference service places an emphasis on identifying support across family networks. This means that improvements in children's lives are not solely dependent on professional activity but are built on family strengths and resources.

For most children, plans result in services and support to families that make a positive difference. Actions are mostly specific to individual children's needs, with timescales to monitor progress. However, the majority of plans do not contain contingency arrangements, to prevent drift and delay when plans are not progressing as they should.

Most children are supported at the right level of intervention. When child in need plans are not effective, increasing risks are recognised and escalated to child protection thresholds. Conversely, children safely step down from child protection plans to child in need plans when risks reduce. A high level of multi-agency engagement ensures that decisions are open to scrutiny and challenge. This provides a good level of management oversight and quality assurance.

During the visit, senior leaders recognised that when children are removed from a child protection plan at the first review conference due to becoming looked after, the practice is to inform professionals and families by letter, rather than holding a meeting. This does not promote working together or allow professionals who were involved in the original decision to have that formal discussion or raise concerns. This issue is now being addressed by senior leaders.

A clear process is in place for when concerns about children escalate and consideration is needed for PLO. Senior leaders take responsibility for making critical decisions regarding children's lives. A tracking system has been developed that enables managers to have a comprehensive overview of all children in pre-proceedings. Regular review points are built into the process to monitor progress and where necessary managers provide a rationale for where proceedings are taking longer than expected. The quality of letters before proceedings has significantly improved from a low base. Although letters are now more personal and the use of professional language and jargon has reduced, letters are difficult for parents to fully understand what is required of them.

Most supervision is held regularly and is effective. Social workers receive well-recorded supervision which pulls together critical information and progress updates, alongside good direction for future work. The tracking of each child's individual needs are considered and the opportunity to critically reflect on children's progress is used effectively to ensure that work undertaken is dynamic and responds to changes in their lives. However, for a small minority, actions are not consistently pulled through to subsequent supervision sessions for managers to check progress and provide further advice and guidance.

The quality assurance framework is firmly embedded and provides managers and senior leaders with a clear line of sight on practice. The development of the quality assurance framework shows a change in culture and a positive impact on practice. Auditors have a better understanding of what good practice looks like, and monthly audit reports capture the issues and learning from audit activity. Embedded

hyperlinks to relevant material provide a guide for practitioners to access helpful research and resources.

Some audits are of poorer quality, with a lack of analysis and subsequent actions that would improve outcomes for children. In these audits, the auditors' focus on compliance means that issues regarding quality do not gain the attention they require.

Senior managers have made significant progress in stabilising the workforce through recruiting a large number of permanent staff. However, the workforce remains fragile due to agency staff leaving the local authority and high levels of staff sickness. As a result, caseloads for some social workers have increased, which has had a detrimental impact on the quality of work. In addition, for short periods of time, some children are allocated to team managers, pending new social workers starting. This means that some children experience changes in social worker, preventing them from establishing positive relationships.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Andrew Waugh
Her Majesty's Inspector