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Dear Ms Old

Focused visit to North Tyneside children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to North Tyneside children's services on 27 and 28 April 2022. Her Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Louise Walker and Matt Reed.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for the 'front door' through the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) and social work assessment teams.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework and inspectors met with practitioners and managers on site. Inspectors reviewed children's records in detail and appraised the quality and impact of audit activity and leadership.

Headline findings

Children and families in North Tyneside receive highly effective services when referred to the social care front door. Thresholds to access early help and children's social care services are well understood and embedded across social work teams and partner agencies. The front door workforce is highly skilled and knowledgeable. Children in need of help and protection receive a response that is timely and proportionate and improves their situation. Children's lived experiences are well considered leading to informed and effective interventions.

A strong and effective senior leadership team promotes a culture of innovation and 'doing the right thing' for individual children. This is creating an environment for staff at the front door, where excellent practice can flourish. Managers effectively use supervision, performance data and audit activity to scrutinise and inform practice developments. Well-established professional partnerships are embedded in routine decision-making and practice. A range of agencies are co-located in the MASH who work effectively as one team with one goal, which is to safeguard children and improve their outcomes.

Main findings

Children in need of help and protection benefit from highly effective social care and early help support. Contacts and referrals to the front door are managed by skilled and experienced staff with robust management oversight. Proportionate multi-agency checks are undertaken during a timely triage process. Relevant historical information is considered by social workers to inform the next steps. This is ensuring children receive the right level of help and support at the right time. Consent is well understood across agencies and at the front door. Where consent is dispensed with, the rationale is clearly articulated and recorded in children's records.

There is a good range of early help support for children and their families. Stringent efforts are made to work with families at an early stage by social care and the wider partnership, which is providing support to children and their families as soon as problems start. This is enabling families to become involved in the decisions which affect them at the earliest opportunity.

Early help assessments are detailed and facilitate coordinated multi-agency support. They enable professionals to efficiently identify the emerging needs of children in need of help and support and effectively identify when to escalate to children's social care when concerns increase. Consideration is given to the individual needs of brothers and sisters, which is ensuring that children receive bespoke responses to their needs. When families no longer need interventions from social care, decisions to step down to early help are timely and appropriate. When needed, families continue to receive support that meets their needs at the right level. This means that families are not subject to statutory interventions for unnecessary periods of time and, for many families, this prevents concerns re-emerging.

The emergency duty team is responsive to concerns which happen out of hours. Where needed, emergency action is taken. Timely recording and effective communication with daytime staff ensure that they are well informed about any follow-up actions which are needed.

Daily triage meetings between police and social care supports effective decision-making in response to domestic abuse concerns. In addition, early help multi-agency triage meetings contribute to information-sharing and planned actions. Thresholds for intervention to children's social care are appropriately and consistently applied. The MASH triage model promotes an ethos of shared responsibility across the multi-agency partnership to meet the needs of vulnerable children and their families. There is a wide range of services to support families when their need for additional support is identified.

Children's assessments are timely and proportionate. Historic information is well considered, and information is gathered from a wide range of sources. Social workers effectively analyse risk and protective factors to inform future planning and

have a good understanding of children's identity and cultural needs. There is a clear commitment to working with families and their support networks. Social workers consistently identify and engage with wider family networks to build support and extend the safeguards for children.

When child protection concerns are identified, strategy meetings are timely and are well attended by the relevant agencies. Multi-agency information-sharing is highly effective and leads to a good understanding of risks and children's lived experiences. Partner agencies engage well with social workers in scaling strengths and worries and record clear rationale for the next steps. This leads to timely and robust action to safeguard children.

Sensitive and well-planned approaches by social workers ensure that children's views are consistently obtained and are included in assessments and during section 47 enquiries. Direct work captures what children think is working well for them and their families and what worries they have. This provides social workers with a good understanding of children's experiences and influences planning and interventions.

The designated officer (LADO) service provides a robust response to concerns and allegations about individuals working with children and young people. Clear actions are recorded and taken forward to safeguard individual children and wider groups within organisations.

The response to children and young people who go missing and may be at risk of exploitation has been strengthened by the creation of the Future Steps team. There is evidence of a positive impact for young people as effective and trusting relationships are developed with workers, which leads to robust safety planning.

Strong and effective senior leadership is resulting in sustained improvements in both the quality and impact of social work practice at the front door. The self-evaluation provides an accurate reflection of practice and performance. A wide range of performance data is used effectively to monitor and scrutinise front door activity. This includes the timeliness of decision-making, assessments and staff workloads. This assists senior managers to understand children's experiences and improve practice. Frontline management oversight and support is clearly articulated in children's records. Clear direction is given to social workers at the point of case allocation about how social workers will help and support children and their families. Timely and effective supervision reviews children's progress and the effectiveness of interventions.

Senior leaders are rightly proud of the service they have continued to provide during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. The MASH service responded to an immense increase in referrals during 2020/21, working remotely alongside partners to maintain this key function. Social workers in the assessment teams continued to see children and their families face to face where it was needed and safe to do so. Staff

have been supported to work in agile ways with sensitive consideration to their emotional well-being. Senior leaders paused their existing programme of audits during the pandemic in response to the pressures of increased demand on team managers and staff. However, they have continued to carry out thematic audits. Auditors currently focus on measuring the quality of the work and whether children are being effectively supported and safeguarded. The full programme of full collaborative audits is planned to recommence in the very near future.

Staff morale in North Tyneside is very high. Staff are well supported by line managers and senior managers, who are approachable and visible. Social workers are supported to progress different career options and there is a wide range of learning and development opportunities available to staff. Staff spoken to during this visit feel invested in and valued, and are committed to staying in North Tyneside. This is contributing to the retention of social workers and managers and provides continuity of service to vulnerable children and their families.

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

Yours sincerely

Louise Walker
Her Majesty's Inspector