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Dear Kathryn Boulton

Focused visit to Redcar and Cleveland children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Redcar and Cleveland children's services on 4 and 5 July 2023. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Teresa Godfrey, Rachel Griffiths and Cath Heron.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for front door.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. Inspectors were on site during this visit. They spoke with social workers, managers and leaders. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.

Headline findings

Since the previous inspection, in June 2022, when the experience and progress of children who require help and protection was judged to require improvement to be good, senior leaders have responded swiftly to the areas for improvement. Systems and processes have been strengthened, risk of harm and need are recognised promptly, and children receive an appropriate level of support at the right time.

Staff and managers at the front door have a relentless focus on doing what is right for children. There is strong political support and a committed and visible leadership team focused on improving services for children.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice?

- Wider partnership understanding of threshold for referral to children's social care.
- Work with the Police to address the volume of inappropriate police protection notifications to children's social care.

Main findings

Front door staff respond to contacts and referrals in a timely way. When children are identified as needing help or protection, their needs are responded to at the right level. Risk of harm and need is recognised and responded to effectively.

Professional contacts to the multi-agency children's hub (MACH) seeking help and support for children and their families are of variable quality. Not all partners understand well enough the threshold criteria for access to children's social care. The volume of contacts and inappropriate contacts by police to the MACH places unnecessary pressures on the front door resource.

Managers provide appropriate oversight and direction following the receipt of a contact into the MACH. Contacts are assigned a priority level for screening which is proportionate to the presenting level of need or risk.

Social workers effectively conduct checks and take swift action in response to the presenting concerns. Children's histories and previous agency involvement are routinely recorded in the screening process. While analysis of this information is not always evident in children's records, the response to the concerns are appropriate.

There is appropriate partner representation in the MACH. Information-sharing between agencies when a contact regarding a child is received is mostly timely and effective and contributes to decision-making and consideration of risk. Parental consent for information-sharing is usually sought and obtained. When a decision is made to dispense with parental consent it is proportionate to the level of risk, and the management rationale for this is clearly recorded.

Thresholds are applied appropriately in the MACH. At the end of the screening process, social workers make recommendations to ensure that the next steps best meet the child's level of need. The level of management oversight in the MACH has improved since the last inspection. Management oversight of these recommendations is well recorded and clear.

When concerns escalate for children who receive early help, there are clear systems in place for their cases to step up to children's social care. When this happens, most children are visited promptly by a social worker. When concerns for children reduce, there are also clear systems in place for their cases to step down to early help services. For a small minority of children there is a short delay in them being visited following step down. Early help assessments are co-produced with children and families and plans are fully informed by what children have shared during creative and sensitive direct work. Early help support is making a positive difference to children's lives.

When the threshold is met for a statutory assessment of need, children's cases transfer from the MACH to the assessment service without delay. Managers in the assessment service give clear and timely instruction, which helps social workers prioritise their work and respond promptly to support and reduce risk to children.

Assessments are timely and proportionate. They consider the child's history and significant events in their lives. Children's uniqueness and characteristics are sensitively considered and understood. Social workers are persistent, they demonstrate professional curiosity and consider the impact of cumulative neglect on children. Social workers seek to understand the child's experience and creative, child-centred work is completed during the assessment to ensure their voices are heard.

Visits to children are timely, regular and child focused. Support for children and families is put in place during the assessment process, which means they do not wait until the assessment concludes before receiving a service. Social workers make appropriate recommendations at the end of assessments, and these lead to children's needs being recognised and responded to in line with their level of risk and need. Management oversight of these recommendations is well recorded and clear.

When children are at risk of significant harm, the response is prompt. Quickly convened strategy meetings are well attended by relevant partner agencies. Quality multi-agency information is shared, resulting in the right decisions being made about next steps for children. Although actions are not routinely timebound, children are seen on the same day as the referral, and there is a strong focus on safety planning to ensure their safety.

When risks to children increase child protection enquiries provide a detailed analysis of children's needs and the level of risk. As investigations progress and additional information becomes known, children's safety plans are adapted to reflect either increased or decreased risk.

Outcomes following a child protection enquiry are appropriate. When children's cases progress to initial child protection conference, this takes place in a timely way and results in the development of multi-agency plans.

When children are homeless, or potentially homeless, a social worker is promptly allocated to undertake an assessment in conjunction with housing services, where appropriate. Social workers are tenacious in their efforts to speak with and visit children to ensure that they are safe and are living in suitable accommodation. Children are advised of their rights and entitlements and are given time and support to consider their choices. Children become looked after when this is needed.

When it is necessary for children to enter care on an emergency basis, this is appropriate and there is a clear and well-recorded management rationale to support this. Risk for these children is reduced and their records clearly reflect their

experience. The responses to children's needs out of hours are proportionate and appropriate.

Due to capacity issues, some children wait too long before they transfer from the assessment service to the longer term social work teams. This has resource implications for the assessment teams and means that the support and intervention required to progress children's plans of support or protection are delayed.

Quality assurance activity is not of a consistently high quality. This can limit the impact it has on practice and service improvement. Prior to this visit, senior leaders had recognised the shortfalls and have worked proactively with a neighbouring authority improvement partner to review their process. Senior leaders expect to launch a new audit tool and process in the near future.

Senior leaders have proactively responded to workforce and workload challenges and strive to make Redcar and Cleveland a 'great place to work'. The social workers and managers inspectors spoke to were unanimously positive about working in Redcar and Cleveland. They describe a culture of learning, with access to relevant training and a visible, responsive senior leadership team. Social workers and staff spoken to during this visit are knowledgeable, confident and know their children well. Although they describe a fluctuating and sometimes high workload, they feel valued and cared for by their managers.

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

Yours sincerely

Teresa Godfrey
His Majesty's Inspector