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Dear Cath

Focused visit to Newcastle children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Newcastle children's services on 20 and 21 September 2023. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Louise Walker and Cath Heron.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for the 'front door' and responses to children who may be in need of interventions.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. 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 Newcastle receive effective responses when referred to the social care front door. Children in need of help and protection receive a response that is timely and proportionate and improves their situation. The front door workforce is highly skilled and knowledgeable. Children's lived experiences are well considered, leading to informed and effective interventions.

There is an aspirational culture created by the senior leadership team and lead portfolio holder, who strive to be the best children's service they can be. Constructive challenge across the safeguarding partnership is now evident, enabling the partnership to deliver on the agreed priorities that support children and families.

Inspectors saw in the scope of this focused visit that practice has improved in recent months. Senior leaders have a strong grip where improvements are needed, and have plans in place to take these forward.

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

- Work with partners to improve their understanding of thresholds, consent and the quality of information shared in contacts.

Main findings

There is a strong multi-agency early help offer in Newcastle that provides children and families with a wide range of support. This means that families receive the right level of intervention at the right time for them.

When concerns about children and families increase, there are effective processes in place to step children up to statutory social care services. When this happens, early help workers remain involved until it is clear that social work intervention needs to continue. This means that established and trusting working relationships for families are sustained.

The quality of contacts from partner agencies to the front door varies. Not all professionals understand or apply thresholds, and some share information with children's services without parental consent. In some contacts information is missing, and it is not always clear why the professional is concerned and believes the child needs help. This results in valuable social work time at the front door being used to clarify information and seek consent. Parental consent is well understood by social workers in the front door service. Practitioners skilfully engage parents, demonstrating a good understanding of parents' rights while being clear about the concerns for the child and what action needs to take place.

When concerns about children are received at the front door they are responded to by knowledgeable, skilled and experienced social workers. The screening of contacts at the front door is effective, resulting in children receiving responses which are timely, proportionate and appropriate. Risks as a result of accumulative harm are considered well.

The emergency duty team is responsive to concerns about children out of hours and at weekends. Where needed, emergency action is taken. The interface between the daytime service and emergency duty team workers is effective. Timely information-sharing between the two services means there is no delay in families receiving follow-up interventions when concerns are raised out of office hours.

Management oversight is evident on all contacts, which provides direction for workers and a rationale for decisions made. This means that workers are clear about actions to be taken. For anyone accessing the records in the future they will have a clear understanding of how and why decisions about them were made.

Daily triage meetings in the front door service enable strong multi-agency discussion which supports decision-making. The introduction of a RAG rating helps practitioners to prioritise the response to children's needs and risks. Concerns relating to domestic

abuse and long-term neglect are responded to appropriately and if needed escalate into child protection procedures.

Most children who are reported missing into the front door are responded to appropriately. Return home interviews are not always completed in a timely manner, which creates delays in understanding the child's experience during the missing episode. However, there are plans in place to develop the service and address the shortfalls.

When child protection concerns are identified, multi-agency strategy meetings are convened swiftly. They are attended by statutory partners and other relevant professionals who share information that considers the presenting concerns in the context of family history and previous involvement. This leads to a clearer understanding of the impact on children and appropriate actions being taken to safeguard them.

When children are considered to be at risk of harm, child protection enquiries quickly progress and are completed in partnership with families and other professionals. While assessments are under way, interim safety plans are used to support the family and reduce risk to the child.

The quality of children's assessments and plans undertaken in the front door service is improving. Most children are seen quickly by social workers who make effective observations, engage families and demonstrate professional curiosity and expertise. In records seen, children's unique characteristics and cultures are considered when assessing needs and providing support to the family.

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 from screening through to assessment work in the front door service.

Direct work is undertaken with children which enables conversations to take place about their current experiences and what they would want to be different. This informs assessment and planning work with parents and provides some very powerful messages and motivation for parents to effect change.

Children presenting as homeless receive an assessment of need and prompt support to find suitable accommodation. Reunification with family is routinely considered and facilitated when this is safe to do so. Children are offered information about their rights to become a child in care and their views taken in account to enable them to make informed decisions.

There are strong, clear systems in place for recording allegations against professionals who work with children. The designated officer is tenacious in compiling detailed chronologies, keeping clear records of actions needed to

safeguard individual children and wider groups within organisations. The designated officer tracks the progress and outcome of investigations effectively.

The senior leadership team is outward-looking and takes the lead on learning from good practice regionally and nationally. Practice and services are developing as a result of this.

Professional partnerships are maturing at a strategic level as a result of a number of recent changes in key staff across statutory partner agencies. This, alongside changes in front line management posts in the front door, has provided workers with improved team morale and a renewed sense of purpose and direction.

There is a range of quality assurance activity undertaken across the front door service, including thematic dip sampling, case file auditing and direct observations of practice. This provides managers with a broad insight into the quality of screening and assessment work and assurance of decisions made for children. Managers at all levels across the service use supervision, performance data and audit activity effectively to scrutinise practice and inform improvements.

Workers talked about the benefits of audit activity. Some had been involved in recent case file discussions with auditors. They welcomed the feedback and spoke about the benefit of wider learning across all teams of the briefing notes that are shared with teams.

Workers described supportive line management arrangements with managers who are genuinely interested in their welfare and work-life balance and who provide clear direction in terms of practice. This results in a workforce that feels valued and invested in and this is supporting social work retention.

Workers and managers have access to a range of training and career development opportunities. Workers identify improvements in their practice and confidence in their role as a result of this learning. This means children have allocated social workers who are skilled and motivated in their work.

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

Yours sincerely

Louise Walker
His Majesty's Inspector