

Ofsted
Piccadilly Gate
Store Street
Manchester
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231
Textphone 0161 618 8524
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.gov.uk/ofsted



29 November 2023

Jill Colbert OBE
Director of Children's Services and Chief Executive, Together for Children
Sunderland Civic Centre
Burdon Road
Sunderland
Tyne and Wear
SR2 7DN

Dear Ms Colbert

Focused visit to Sunderland children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit on 25 and 26 October 2023 to Together for Children, who are delegated to deliver early help and statutory children's services on behalf of Sunderland Council. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Catherine Heron and Louise Walker.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need or subject to a child protection plan.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

Inspectors looked at a range of evidence in children's case records, including assessments, care plans and child protection enquiries. Inspectors held case discussions with social workers and managers. Inspectors also looked at the organisation's performance management and quality assurance information.

Headline findings

Children in need or those subject to a child protection plan in Sunderland typically receive timely and effective support when they need it. Their needs and risks are assessed by highly skilled and committed workers who, in partnership with children's family networks and professionals, develop clear plans to make children safer. Senior leaders know their service very well. Their quality assurance and performance management systems ensure that they have a firm grip on the quality of practice, child impact and changes in demand. Leaders maintain effective oversight of frontline practice. They are ambitious for children and families in Sunderland and have a clear vision for continuous service improvement.

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

- The earlier identification of neglect.
- The written records of supervision, case discussions and management direction.

Main findings

Most children's assessments seen during this visit are timely, and child-focused. They include information from a range of sources which is used to analyse risk to children and identify their support needs. Previous history and involvement with families is considered for most children. When assessments are in progress, workers have a good sense of what is happening in the child's life and the action needed while the assessment is under way.

Strengthening family networks is a priority for Together for Children. When families experience challenges that impact on their children, social workers help parents to coordinate a family meeting which involves other relatives and friends. Families are encouraged to talk about the presenting issues and be part of the solution for change. For some, this is the first time that they have talked openly about their problems and heard their child's point of view. This practice promotes family resilience and helps to improve children's lives.

Resulting children's plans address the presenting worries and are clear to families about the actions needed to promote positive change. Most plans include clear timescales that are meaningful for children and contain contingency planning. Regular reviews enable parents and professionals to explore the progress of identified actions. In a small number of children's cases, these meetings do not always include key professionals who know the child well or see them often. This impacts on the quality of multi-agency information-sharing and understanding of the child's needs. Senior leaders are aware of this and have plans to address this within the local partnership.

Weekly child-in-need clinics, chaired by a senior manager, review children's cases to consider the most appropriate level of support for children. Social workers value these clinics as an opportunity to discuss and reflect on their practice and review the effectiveness of interventions. The clinics provide an additional layer of management oversight of children's cases and managers provide clear direction and advice to social workers.

Children's wishes and feelings are well understood by their social workers. Workers undertake creative direct work with children, which helps children to express what life is like for them, and the changes that they feel are needed. Social workers show genuine warmth and empathy to children's situations and the challenges faced by their parents. This helps children to feel listened to and for them to develop trusting

relationships with professionals. Where there are barriers to obtaining children's views, workers think of ways to overcome this.

Disabled children are having their needs met by enthusiastic and committed staff. Social workers are skilled in communicating with children and understanding their additional needs. Assessments are thorough and personalised, capturing the unique strengths of the child and how their disability affects them and their family. When disabled children's needs change or risks escalate, step-up arrangements for further protection and support are seamless. Workers advocate strongly for children and families to ensure that they receive the right services at the right time. This helps to improve the quality of children's lives and ease family stresses.

Neglect impacts on a significant proportion of children in need of help and protection in Sunderland. For most children, social workers respond effectively to provide children and their families with meaningful interventions that meet the child's and family's needs. However, for a small number of children, social workers and their managers did not recognise the extent and duration of the child's neglect. This means that for some children, their circumstances did not improve soon enough.

When risks to children increase, strategy meetings are swiftly convened and are well attended by statutory and wider partners. Professionals share relevant information, which informs analysis of risk to children and the actions needed to reduce risk. When appropriate, child protection enquiries are progressed. For children who are missing or at risk of exploitation, there is strong multi-agency work which includes effective disruption activity.

Safety planning is carried out in response to risks to children. Some children's plans include specific goals, timescales for progress to be achieved, and clear responsibilities for each member of the child's network. These plans link well to the presenting risks and how they will reduce.

Children who need urgent protection during the night or at weekends receive an effective response from the out-of-hours team. Workers liaise with on-call managers and police to reach appropriate decisions and identify safer arrangements for children, for example identifying safe and appropriate alternative carers for children when risks at home are at too high.

Child protection plans are mostly effective in making children safer. Plans support the strengths within families, address the vulnerabilities and risk factors and prioritise the well-being of the child. For a small number of children, their case is closed too soon before sustained change is evidenced. While more recent practice is improving the children's circumstances, they have experienced repeat interventions for the same reasons.

Core group meetings are routinely held and review the progress of children's protection plans. Some partners are regular attendees, but there are others who are often absent. This leads to gaps in some agency information-sharing. This impacts on the wider understanding of children's circumstances, whether risks to children have changed, or what additional support the child needs.

Reviews of child protection plans are timely. Parents and carers are involved in review meetings where appropriate, in addition to key statutory partners and individuals who know the children well. Relevant information is shared and considered and is used in the scaling of worries, and to inform decision-making. This helps parents to understand the things that professionals are worried about, what needs to change and in what timescales.

Senior leaders invite regular and independent scrutiny of their performance and practice quality. Governance arrangements are clear, and relationships within the wider council and across the partnership are well established and positive. Scrutineers describe Together for Children as a 'learning organisation which is led by senior leaders who listen and reflect on practice to further improve services to children and families.'

The stable senior leadership team understands local need very well. Effective performance management and quality assurance systems enable leaders to understand the service demands, and coordinate appropriate responses where needed. Leaders are consistently driving practice improvement, with a relentless focus on improving outcomes for children and their families.

Workers trust senior leaders and describe them as committed, visible and approachable. Senior leaders are very close to operational practice. They know workers by name and have a good knowledge of the children that they are working with. Workers said that this makes them feel valued, and that leaders are genuinely interested in them and in the children's progress and well-being.

Managers are solution-focused and work together to respond to increases in demand, ensuring that children are allocated to a worker in a timely manner. Capacity issues in some locality teams, alongside an increased demand for services, have created challenges which have been responded to effectively by managers. Workers say that caseloads are manageable and that they feel confident that if they were worried, or found their workload unmanageable, they trust their managers would respond positively.

Workers say that they feel well supported to carry out their role and benefit from a range of training relevant to their career pathway. Together for Children invests strongly in supporting workers in their assessed and supported year in employment (ASYE). This enhances worker skills and promotes retention.

Managers provide staff with regular supervision and opportunities to discuss and reflect on their practice. Most children's records document regular management oversight, but not all supervision records provide sufficient evidence of their reflections on children's progress, or record directions to help social workers drive forward children's plans.

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

Yours sincerely

Catherine Heron
His Majesty's Inspector