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Dear Stuart

Monitoring visit to South Tyneside children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to South Tyneside children's services on 30 and 31 July 2024. This was the third monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in May 2023. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Jan Edwards and Rachel Fairhurst.

Areas covered by the visit

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the following areas of concern identified at the last inspection published in May 2023:

- Management recording of decision-making rationale throughout the service, including the timeliness and efficacy of senior leaders' written oversight of children's plans, in order to reflect live decision-making.
- The local authority's effectiveness in ensuring that there are enough suitable regulated homes for children who cannot live with their birth families.
- How quickly the local authority finds and agrees permanent homes for children and how effectively independent reviewing officers scrutinise and challenge both this process and wider planning for children.

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

Headline findings

Senior leaders have continued to build on improvements to children's services in South Tyneside since the last inspection published in May 2023. In this, the third monitoring visit, there has been a cumulative improvement in practice: in the development of a transparent open culture; in the oversight of children in and use of unregistered homes; in a more focused approach to corporate parenting; and in

managerial oversight at all levels of the service. In addition, investment in the service is creating senior manager capacity to provide focused oversight for children in care. This has resulted in positive experiences of care for most of the children that were reviewed on this visit. There remain some discrete areas of practice which require further improvement, particularly the consistency of practice; in more authoritative permanence planning for children; in developing a sufficiency of homes for children; and in the manager and independent reviewing officer's (IRO) role in driving plans so that children do not experience delay. The strategic quartet of the director of children's services, chief executive, council leader and the lead member for children's services continue to work together effectively to drive the children's services' improvement agenda. This work is overseen by the Improvement Board and the work of the Department for Education Advisor.

Findings and evaluation of progress

The majority of children who come into care do so in a planned way, and those decisions are sound and proportionate. This supports the introduction of children to their new homes and their new carers and helps children to settle. Some children who came into care more recently did so in an emergency and under police powers of protection. This has led to reactionary planning with children living in emergency homes while alternative longer-term options are sourced. This often means that children take longer to settle as they need to move homes quickly when a longer-term, more permanent home is found.

The vast majority of children in care live in South Tyneside or within 20 miles of the borough or across the wider north-east region. This is, in part, achieved through a majority of children more recently coming into care living in their extended family. This is supporting children with their life-long links in their birth family, maintaining their cultural and wider identity and providing continuity in their education to support their learning and sustain their friendship groups.

The majority of children who live in foster care do so with family or people known to them in connected care or kinship care. Connected and kinship carer assessments are thorough and analytical, supporting decision-making about where children should live. A knowledgeable, connected carer team is supporting social workers to recognise when there is a need to oversee family arrangements. There is clear management oversight and tracking to ensure timely assessment and to prevent unnecessary delay for children. This is a clear improvement in practice for children since the last inspection.

The support offer for connected and kinship carers has been further developed as part of the continuous improvement. Supervision of carers, regular support groups and training shaped by stakeholder consultation, activities for children and coffee mornings are part of a wider approach to ensuring that connected carers have improved knowledge, skills and resilience to care for their children.

Most children in care are living in foster homes. Social workers are confident that these homes are providing warm and caring environments that are enabling children to flourish and make progress. The Mockingbird Hubs are supporting foster homes where placements are potentially fragile or carers require additional support. The Hubs provide foster carers with a wider network to support the stability of the placements they provide. This is a contributory factor to recruiting and retaining carers in South Tyneside. Furthermore, it provides support systems for children who enjoy friendship and activity groups with their 'foster cousins' who live with other Hub carers. The creative use of retired foster carers as 'community carers' is providing valuable additional support to families with children on the edge of care or support or respite to family and mainstream carers.

The lack of suitable foster care for younger children with more complex needs has resulted in some younger children being placed in residential children's homes. These children's experience of trauma associated with adverse childhood experience means that residential children's homes are a positive option following multiple breakdowns of their foster homes. In a small number of children's cases, the decisions for specialist therapeutic homes could have been made sooner, rather than attempting to support unsustainable foster placements that subsequently broke down. Plans are scrutinised through a range of new or strengthened governance mechanisms, such as case supervision and different management panels. These arrangements ensure that children's homes remain the most appropriate care option for young children. Frequently, children who live in these specialist homes settle, make progress and engage in their therapy, often for the first time.

Older children aged 16 and 17 years old who are living in registered supported accommodation are well supported by the placement provider and their social worker. Assessments are undertaken of children's needs and capacity to live independently, and a distinction is made between care and support needs. Social workers and IROs visit children regularly to seek their views and to ensure that the placement meets their needs. Children's independent living skills are closely monitored, and additional support is provided through their key workers.

A very small number of children have been placed in unregistered children's homes over the last year. At the time of this visit, there are two children in unregistered homes, both of which are in the process of registration. Senior managers have used these homes as a last resort, employing due diligence and the necessary checks to ensure they can meet children's needs. There is extensive manager and senior manager oversight of these arrangements, which extends to the chief executive, improvement board and scrutiny by cabinet boards. These arrangements are now escalated by IROs at stage three of the issues resolution process (IRP), which ensures weekly monitoring at head of service level. This level of oversight is a significant improvement to the arrangements identified at the last inspection. Both children are doing well and making progress in their homes. They are seen weekly by their social workers, and this high level of visiting is providing added assurance of the daily standard of care afforded to the children.

The leadership team has introduced a new model of practice and practice standards. Social workers told inspectors that they were much clearer about what was expected of them, and it made them feel safer to practice. While there has been extensive training delivered to staff on their restorative model of practice, social workers are at different stages in implementing this into practice. Consequently, there has been a variable approach to the use of family finding and family networks in practice. While this has not adversely impacted on the numbers of children who live with their wider family, for some children, this could have been achieved sooner with more formal use of genograms and family networks to identify support and alternative carers. Leaders know they have more to do to fully embed consideration of wider family and the use of family meetings at the earliest opportunity to prevent drift in planning and to achieve consistency for all children.

Carers support children to access community activities and their interests and hobbies. Family time is encouraged and supported, and children's voices are heard in these arrangements. There were some examples of children or their parents needing to travel significant distances in order to maintain contact. Social workers carefully consider the sustainability of these arrangements and the additional complications this brings. There is evidence of contingency plans in place for when attendance at family time is no longer meeting the child's needs.

Children's records show that the virtual school plays a significant role in children's planning to support educational placements, in securing new schools or educational provision. In addition, the child's voice informs decision-making and whether a change of school is appropriate. Additional managerial oversight is provided to determine if a school move can be facilitated.

Not all children have life-story work. This is often as a result of a decision to delay until the child is ready to participate in this often difficult work. In the meantime, carers develop creative virtual memory boxes, and social workers can access the life-story team for consultation about a child's readiness for this work.

A recent review of children's permanence decisions and the development of a permanence monitoring group (PMG) have strengthened the approach to the tracking and progression of permanence for children. This is a distinct positive change following the last inspection. There is now robust oversight of children who are waiting for permanence plans to be agreed through the PMG. Most children in long-term foster care, who have not been formally matched with long-term foster carers at permanence panel, now have a date set for matching to be ratified. For a small number of children, achieving legal permanence takes too long. They experience delay in having their plan confirmed due to a range of factors usually associated with court processes. IROs are not providing consistent challenge and oversight to reduce delay for children with a plan of permanence.

Staying put is explored for older children leaving care and monitored by the PMG. This has increased the number of children staying in their homes post 18.

For those children for whom finding a home is proving more difficult, innovative practice around bringing providers together with those who know the children well is enabling the exploration of homes that otherwise would not have been considered. This creates further opportunities for children to secure permanence.

When children in care return to live with parents, the placement with parents' arrangements are based on thorough assessments and robust management oversight at senior level. Care Orders are discharged appropriately through the court, and plans are overseen by the IRO service. Management oversight, social work visits and direct work undertaken with children living at home add additional oversight and understanding of the child's lived experience.

There is inconsistency in the quality of care plans for children. Some plans are effective in addressing children's wide-ranging needs. Other written plans are basic and do not comprehensively address issues such as family time, emotional and mental health needs or participation and community inclusion. Some brothers and sisters share plans that are not individualised to them, which makes it challenging to identify individual needs. Cultural needs, such as hair care, food, faith and language, are considered in care planning. The child's family are involved in decisions about how their children's needs can be met, particularly when the home is not a cultural match for the child.

Children's versions of the care plans, 'My Care Plan', are completed alongside children, using them as the basis for direct work and ensuring that they have the child's views and wishes at the centre of the planning. They include clear arrangements for children to spend time with those people who matter to them. Social workers ensure that important family links with children's birth families and other important people are maintained when this is appropriate and in line with their wishes. This supports children's sense of identity.

Most children's health needs are well met. Social workers ensure that children access the right emotional and mental health services to meet their needs, including bereavement counselling and play therapy. The majority of children are now up to date with their health assessments and dental appointments, which is a significant improvement from the last inspection. However, when children live some distance outside of the borough, access to mental health support through child and adolescent mental health services is not readily available due to extensive waiting times. This means that, for a small number of children, their progress as a result of the stability of the care provided may be compromised, while their much-needed therapy remains on hold.

Children in care reviews are held regularly and are timely. There is inconsistency in children attending their meetings, although IROs visit them to seek their views. Children are informed of their rights to an advocate when they are first visited by their IRO, although this is not routinely followed up or discussed and minuted in their meetings. Social workers and IROs are using children's review meetings to address the actions outlined on the child's plan, and this is helping many children to make

progress. However, this sharp focus on the plan and progress is not consistent for all children, and there are examples of drift in the completion of assessments and long-term matching being delayed.

Under the new senior leadership team, the IRO service is now under the remit of children's services. There has been improved oversight by IROs of children's plans through a clearer line of sight to practice. There has been a very tangible shift to a more positive open culture within the IRO team, while remaining independent, which reflects the same cultural shift in the wider service. IROs report an improved confidence in leaders' decision-making, the new systems and processes introduced and the direct line to the head of service which is supporting their ability to challenge when it is required.

IROs regularly visit children, undertake mid-way reviews and talk to professionals and carers, but this work is not consistently recorded in children's case files. Leaders accept that there is more to do to ensure that challenge by IROs and their impact for children is evidenced in records. A clear area of improvement is in the oversight and challenge that the IRO brings to children placed in unregistered settings. These children have been raised at stage three of the IRP process and are discussed at weekly Head of Service meetings until the homes are registered.

There is robust managerial oversight of key decisions which are made about children. This takes the form of case notes on children's case records and in panels and meetings, showing clear line of sight to practice and accountable decision-making. Supervision of social workers by their practice managers is improving and gives a focus to the impact of parental behaviours on children and the need for intervention. This level of managerial oversight within children's records will help children to understand how decisions are made about them as they grow older and into adulthood.

Senior leaders have continued to strengthen quality assurance processes. Findings are routinely translated into individual or whole-service learning. Leaders now have a more accurate understanding of the quality of practice and know themselves well.

Corporate parenting has been refreshed following consultation with children and young people. A partnership-wide corporate parenting summit resulted in eight new promises to children being made. Corporate parenting is now more sharply focused, purposeful and engaging. A recently developed 'year of action' means that there is a sustained council-wide approach to their corporate parenting responsibilities.

Leaders are addressing sufficiency of homes for children through a strategy of investment in residential homes and in developing the fostering service. The commitment to family finding within children's own family and friends network is ensuring that more children are living in their wider families. The restructure and collaboration of the commissioning and placements team into the 'finding homes team' has ensured a cohesive and joint approach to finding homes for children.

Leaders have plans in place to enhance this further through the introduction of a commissioner specifically for children.

Social workers see children regularly and according to their needs, which helps them to get to know their children very well. They speak about them with pride and genuine affection. Social workers work hard to form trusting relationships with children and to determine their wants and feelings. They also spoke about their confidence in leaders supporting child-focused decisions.

Social workers told inspectors that their supervision is regular, reflective and effective. Practice managers are using a new supervision format which pulls through the plan and any learning from audit. This has the potential to support the tracking of the effectiveness of planning for children and remedial actions to fill gaps in practice. This practice still needs to be consistently embedded to be fully effective in driving plans.

Social workers speak positively about the support they receive from their managers. They are clear that the environment feels safe and that they feel respected and valued. Staff spoke positively about the changes in the culture of the service, and their morale is high. Workloads are manageable, allowing time to form relationships and undertake visits at a frequency based on need.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. You may share this letter with others if you wish.

Yours sincerely

Jan Edwards
His Majesty's Inspector