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Dear Louise

Focused visit to Stoke-on-Trent City Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Stoke-on-Trent children's services on 11 and 12 April 2018. The inspectors were Brenda McLaughlin HMI and Pauline Higham HMI.

Inspectors evaluated the local authority's arrangements for the protection of vulnerable adolescents.

Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including discussions with social workers and their managers. They met with highly committed staff across agencies, who are steadfast in their efforts to engage with, and make a positive difference for, vulnerable children and young people. Additionally, inspectors looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.

Overview

Since the last inspection in 2015, senior leaders and elected members in Stoke-on-Trent, together with relevant partner agencies, have worked persistently to improve services for children at risk of sexual, criminal and gang exploitation and those for whom there are concerns arising from going missing from home, care or education. Most children's views are listened to and acted on. Risks are identified well and responded to promptly. This group of vulnerable children benefit from well-coordinated targeted services, at the right level, from a variety of skilled and knowledgeable practitioners based with different agencies.

Workload pressures for managers and staff in children's social care present the greatest challenge. While staff are extremely positive about working for Stoke-on-Trent children's services, social work caseloads are too high, with the majority of staff working at capacity. Although no young people were found to be at immediate risk, inspectors question the appropriateness of social workers being expected to provide 30 vulnerable children, who have extremely complex needs, with a consistently effective service. This is not sustainable. Insufficient recording of managers' decisions and 'pod' supervision on children files means that it is unclear whether work is being tracked and reviewed.

Findings

- The local authority's mature strategic relationships with its key safeguarding partners have led to effective and innovative practice with sexually and criminally exploited children, those missing from home and care and young people associated with gangs. This work remains an important priority for the city council and the safeguarding children board. Working relationships with stakeholders to help and protect these vulnerable children are very positive and productive. Together, relevant partners identify and respond well to local challenges and demands.
- Staff in Stoke-on-Trent work in a service that is both challenging and supportive. Most social workers have approximately 30 cases each. This includes newly qualified staff, who do not have protected caseloads and who are also responsible for child protection work. This is excessive. Nevertheless, morale is good and staff retention is high. Social workers and their managers recognise that they would not be able to manage the consistently high volumes of work without the council's 'systemic approach'. A number of small teams or 'pods' supported by social work assistants and an administrator are collectively responsible for the work. In addition, a wide range of apposite resources for vulnerable adolescents provided by other teams and services are making a positive difference for this cohort of young people.
- Timely risk assessments using a risk factor matrix tool ensure that children can be supported with the right intervention at the right time. Well-established, multi-agency locality forums (observed by inspectors) provide effective early intervention to prevent risks escalating. Communication between relevant agencies and skilled practitioners is thorough. Decisions on thresholds for services are made by suitably qualified and experienced social workers and managers.
- Succinct assessments agreed by managers identify the risks and tell the child's story. Staff know children well. There is a strong emphasis on understanding the impact on children, listening to their views and keeping their interests central to practice. In stronger cases, purposeful, relationship-based work, delivered by skilled, trusted practitioners is making a difference. For example,

workers in the Young People's Drug Project assist young people to understand risks and help them to make informed decisions. Direct work carried out by the authoritative, effective, child sexual exploitation social worker ensures that victims and witnesses receive timely and effective support, enabling them to stay safer.

- Effective workforce planning and recruitment mean that children's services have a stable and experienced workforce, and this enhances consistency for children and their families. Enthusiastic, committed staff at all levels work very hard in difficult circumstances, but are struggling to manage the high volume of work. High numbers of cases and lack of capacity in 'pods' impact on the quality and frequency of supervision. The local authority acknowledges that children's cases files do not provide evidence of management decision-making or that work is being tracked and reviewed. This is a significant weakness in practice.
- The response to children who go missing from home, school or education and those who have been, or are at risk of being, sexually exploited is well coordinated, with evidence of effective multi-agency working and information sharing. The co-location of key staff enables highly effective gathering of information. For example, the child sexual exploitation social worker and the missing person coordinator work collaboratively with social workers and the police to analyse information, which informs prompt action. Data is carefully analysed to identify trends, patterns, hotspots and risky individuals or groups and to inform appropriate protective action. In the last six months, a 50% increase in abduction notices (14) has resulted in more alleged perpetrators being prevented from contacting vulnerable children. Between July 2015 and November 2017, an additional 332 children were safeguarded across Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent as a consequence of focused and resolute action in respect of child sexual exploitation.
- Children who go missing are identified quickly, with prompt and effective action taken to address absences. An externally commissioned service engages well with children to complete return home interviews, including for those children placed in Stoke-on-Trent by other local authorities. Concerns are escalated and if necessary are presented to the multi-agency child sexual exploitation and missing panels, where appropriate safeguarding action is taken.
- Suitable arrangements are in place to safeguard children and young people who are missing from home or full-time education. Appropriate systems are in place to check on those pupils who are electively home educated. Learning services provide a range of learning pathways to meet additional need. The allocation of a keyworker from the learning pathways team ensures that there is robust, regular partnership oversight for children in alternative education provision.

- Strong partnerships and bespoke multi-agency locality hubs serve to protect the increasing number of children at risk of criminal exploitation or gang association. Children benefit from a well-coordinated array of services that provide help at an early stage. The pathway into targeted early intervention provision is clear, and higher risk cases are escalated swiftly. These services are underpinned by a coherent multi-agency strategy, and this is making a significant difference in sharing information and in the provision of suitable interventions.
- Out of hours, emergency duty team (EDT) working jointly with the accomplished placement support team plays an active role in responding to and supporting this vulnerable group of children and their families when they are in crisis. Regular involvement in both strategic and operational meetings, plus effective information-sharing with day-time services are contributing to the accurate mapping of local information. As a consequence, sexually and criminally exploited children, and those missing from home and care are prioritised by EDT staff.
- Stoke-on-Trent council continues to be an outward-facing local authority trialling different ways of working. For example, a project in partnership with six schools, 'Better Together', provides supervision for designated teachers, reducing the number of referrals to children's social care. The street child exploitation team, a Staffordshire police-led team and social workers are responsible for jointly responding to and investigating the cases of sexually exploited or trafficked children. These cases are effectively and jointly dealt with under complex abuse procedures with local authority children's services.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

- The continuous allocation of high numbers of cases to staff in social work teams needs to be reviewed and risk assessed. In particular, work allocated to newly qualified staff needs to be commensurate with their level of experience and expertise.
- Actions arising from the monthly supervision of cases need be recorded clearly, within a prescribed timeframe, and routinely reviewed and evaluated by managers.
- The insufficient capacity of managers and 'pod' administrators to routinely record decisions and case discussion needs to be revised.

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

Yours sincerely

Brenda McLaughlin

Her Majesty's Inspector