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Cath McEvoy  
Executive Director of Children's Services  
Wellbeing & Community Health Services  
Northumberland County Council  
Morpeth  
Northumberland, NE61 2EF

Dear Cath,

## **Focused visit to Northumberland children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Northumberland children's services on 6 and 7 February 2018. The inspectors were Lisa Summers, HMI, and Sheena Doyle, HMI.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for the 'front-door', the service that receives both single and multi-agency contacts and referrals.

During this focused visit, children's services launched a multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). Given the newness, inspectors were not able to evaluate the effectiveness of the full MASH function.

# Overview

Children and young people reviewed as part of this focused visit benefit from a timely and proportionate response when they need help and support. The current leadership team has improved the effectiveness of the local authority's initial response to children and young people needing help and protection. Senior managers have taken a systematic and incremental approach to improving its front-door. They have implemented a single point of contact for families and professionals to raise concerns, and have established pathways into early help services, developing the use of triage, and providing early signposting to appropriate services. Good performance information and quality assurance systems enable managers to

understand frontline practice. This informs their clear vision and plans to further enhance front-door arrangements.

### **What needs to improve in this area of social work practice**

- The local authority may want to review their current response to vulnerable adolescents and children affected by domestic abuse. Some social workers need to better understand the complex nature of relationships in which domestic abuse is a key feature, and improve how risk is identified and managed. This includes the use of written agreements as safety plans.
- All children at risk of child sexual exploitation should have their needs thoroughly assessed, with clear, effective safety planning to manage immediate risks and identify work needed to continue to keep them safe.
- All strategy meetings should clearly identify what multi-agency information is shared, define risks, give the rationale for decision-making, and clearly detail actions to be taken to keep children safe.

### **Findings**

- The front-door provides an easily accessible single point of contact for all families and professionals seeking help and support. The service provides advice and guidance, access to early help and statutory provision and signposting to appropriate services. In the main, children receive the right help at the right time.
- There is a timely and effective response to referrals. Managers oversee all contact and referral decisions. Almost all decisions of threshold seen by inspectors were appropriate. This includes decisions to look after children in emergency circumstances.
- The development of a single front-door is improving consistency in applying thresholds. However, more work needs to be done. Inspectors saw a small number of vulnerable adolescents and children affected by domestic abuse who would have benefited from either social care support earlier or, particularly for the adolescents, being signposted for additional support.
- Management decision-making and the rationale behind the decisions made are evident on children's electronic records. A broad range of multi-agency information informs good decisions on contacts. Dedicated enquiry response advisers (ERAs) research and collate children's histories through accessing a range of partner databases. Although there are virtual arrangements to obtain information from health services to inform decisions for children needing protection, the front-door would benefit from the physical presence of a health expert. This would contribute to the richness of case discussions, including triage meetings, and inform decisions on contacts.

- Arrangements for children to access early help and for escalation to statutory services are effective. Early help coordinators (EHCs) based in the front-door contact families to discuss offers of support and seek consent to share information. Where children need an early help assessment, EHCs proactively contact partners and monitor the completion of assessments. For children in need of statutory services, step-up arrangements are effective.
- Children at risk of significant harm are identified quickly both within and outside of normal working hours. The response for the majority of children is swift, well-coordinated, and managed to ensure timely strategy discussions and investigations. The majority of strategy discussions in the MASH are held promptly in response to identified risks. However, the quality of strategy discussion records seen is too variable. Some are too brief, and do not demonstrate what multi-agency information has been shared to fully understand risk, define safety planning or detail how to proceed with the investigation.
- Child protection investigations seen by inspectors in the MASH are timely, thorough, evidence clear information sharing and focus on risk. Social workers use direct work tools to understand children's views to inform decision-making. In a small number of cases, social workers visit children and families before the strategy meeting has agreed how to proceed or identify how the investigation will be undertaken. This reduces the effectiveness of safety planning and focus of enquires, and could compromise any possible police investigation.
- Assessments are timely and are improving, but are not of consistently high quality. Some assessments do not paint a clear picture of the child's world. Children's histories are not always used effectively to understand the cumulative impact of abuse on children and predict future risks. Extended family members are not always consulted even when it is clear they have caring responsibilities for the children. Some social workers rely too much on parental self-reporting rather than verifying information through other sources. Inspectors saw the impact of poorer assessments for a small number of children who had been re-referred for the same or similar concerns; assessments lacked depth in understanding the children's needs. Resultant plans are vague and ineffective, resulting in some children experiencing up to four assessments in a 12-month period.
- Senior managers are proactively working with managers and social workers to improve assessments. In better assessments, inspectors saw evidence of learning from serious case reviews translating into practice, including considering absent fathers and the completion of chronologies.
- The response to children at risk of child sexual exploitation is variable. Some young people benefit from good multi-agency coordination when progressed to risk management group meetings. For those young people not overseen by these arrangements, the response to managing concerns is inconsistent. For example,

vulnerability checklists to identify levels of risk are not routinely completed and safety plans do not always match the concerns identified.

- Social workers who spoke with inspectors were able to demonstrate a clear understanding of the needs of their children. In particular, those in their assessed and supported year in employment (ASYE) are very well supported, benefit from reflective supervision, good training opportunities, and have protected caseloads. The highest quality assessments seen by inspectors had been undertaken by ASYEs.
- Social workers at the front-door receive regular supervision. There are opportunities to discuss staff welfare, performance and development. Case discussions provide updates on children's current situations but vary in detail. Risks are not routinely reviewed to inform decision-making or to progress case planning. Some appropriate actions to take are identified, but lack timescales. This results in some actions drifting from one supervision to the next.
- Managers use performance information intelligently and access regular data to monitor workflows. This data includes timeliness of decision-making, assessments and staff workloads. Performance information informs audit activity on areas requiring further analysis.
- Senior managers know the strengths and areas for improvement of the front-door well. The self-assessment accurately identifies strengths and areas for improvement. The launch of a quality assurance framework underpinned by regular standard audits, thematic audits and multi-agency audits helps managers identify areas of strength and areas for development. The director of children's services has recently introduced a practice week, when senior managers spend a week with frontline practitioners observing practice, and taking opportunities to speak with children and their families. This is very new and it's too soon to see how this is influencing practice. However, it is a positive initiative to enable managers to understand what it feels like to be a parent and child receiving social care services in Northumberland.
- Improvement plans are clear and appropriately focused on the quality of practice, demand management, and workforce development. This is leading to improvements in practice and, where necessary, assertive action is taken to address poor quality work.

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

Yours sincerely

Lisa Summers  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**