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Dear Mr Weir

Focused visit to Newcastle local authority children's services

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Newcastle local authority children's services on 24 and 25 July 2018. This visit was carried out by Her Majesty's Inspectors, Lisa Summers and Jan Edwards.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for the 'front-door', the Initial Response Service (IRS), which receives both single- and multi-agency contacts and referrals.

Overview

Of the cases seen at this visit, most children and young people benefit from a timely and proportionate response when they first need help and protection. Social workers quickly identify children at risk of significant harm. Senior managers have embraced the learning from the last Ofsted inspection in May 2017. They are resolute in continuing to improve the quality of practice so that children get the right help at the right time. For example, practice is strengthened in relation to decision-making and multi-agency working and there is more appropriate application of threshold to services. Senior managers know their services well through enhanced performance information and robust quality assurance of front-line practice. This is improving service responsiveness and ensures that services for children and families are maintained at a time when demand has increased sharply.

Senior managers recognise that there is more work to do to improve the consistency in approach at the front door so that all children receive an effective social work response. Plans are in place to address this.

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

- Practitioners' understanding and recognition of the cumulative impact of long-term neglect and emotional harm.
- The recording of information to be shared, defined risks, rationale for decision-making, actions to be taken and timescales within strategy discussions.
- The screening of children's overall needs in decisions to undertake further assessment.
- Out-of-hours information-gathering practice in order to inform decisions, particularly in verifying information from parents.
- Caseload allocations in order to enable social workers to undertake consistently good work.
- Assessment of life events, children's relationships with their families and issues of diversity and culture.

Findings

- There is a timely and appropriate response to most contacts and referrals. Children's histories are collated through 'life events' chronologies at the point of contact, ensuring that decisions are informed by the fullest information available.
- Referrals from partners do not always provide sufficient information to allow workers to determine children's needs. Consequently, additional time is spent by staff in IRS seeking clarity before these cases are progressed. This causes unnecessary delay for some children.
- The MASH in Newcastle is well established, providing effective multi-agency information-sharing through mature partnerships. This facilitates a collaborative approach to decision-making. Daily triage meetings robustly review all police concerns, identifying risks for and needs of children, as well as signposting to services including early help.
- Almost all decisions seen about the threshold for services are appropriate. However, for a very small number of children, social workers focus on the presenting issues to the detriment of understanding children's overall needs. The cumulative impact of long-term neglect and emotional harm is not always recognised soon enough, and this results in delays for some children receiving the most appropriate help.
- For most children seen, appropriate systems ensure a timely transition from statutory services to early help. Some lead professionals are not confident to take on this role and this can cause delay to children in receiving lower level support.

Early help assessments and plans vary in quality. Those completed by the local authority are timely, with families receiving good, well-coordinated support. However, the quality of some assessments and planning delivered by partners is weaker and help is not as focused as it could be.

- There is timely and appropriate action when children need a social work response out of office hours. The Emergency Duty Team (EDT) acts to ensure that children are immediately safeguarded, including decisions to accommodate when necessary. However, in a small number of cases seen, social workers do not seek to verify information provided by parents. Consequently, this has not led to a well-informed response.
- Social workers quickly identify children at risk of significant harm. Most responses are swift and evidence good multi-agency information-sharing. Strategy meetings and investigations are timely. Investigation processes have been streamlined in order to focus on risk and protective factors. However, strategy discussions are not consistently well recorded. For example, in cases where children are already receiving a social work service, multi-agency decisions are not well documented until a meeting takes place. Where this is the case, the local authority cannot be assured that appropriate information is considered to inform subsequent actions. When strategy meetings are recorded, planning is not sufficiently detailed. Some agreed actions lack timescales, and interim safety and contingency planning is not defined.
- Decisions to undertake child protection investigations are appropriate. However, inspectors identified a small number of cases where the agreed action was for a single agency investigation when a crime had potentially been committed. In these cases, a joint investigation with the police would have been more appropriate. This has the potential to delay criminal investigations and could result in children having to relive traumatic events unnecessarily.
- Children and family assessments are timely and are improving but are not of sufficiently high quality. They include good multi-agency contribution, use history well, and define clearly the views of children and significant adults. Some are child-focused and identify what life is like for them. However, they do not routinely consider family dynamics, and particularly in the context of the child's relationships with their brothers and sisters. Most assessments seen do not consider the diverse needs of the child arising from their unique background and culture. The early formulation of children's life events within a chronology is positive. However, this is not used consistently well to facilitate an understanding of children's experiences. Some recordings are too sparse, are not kept up to date and the impact that significant events have on children's lives is not consistently well defined.
- Senior managers are responsive to the rise in demand for services and have increased the number of social workers recently. Despite this, social workers in IRS hold high caseloads. Senior managers fully understand that if the current trajectory in demand for service continues, it could undermine the progress

already made to improving practice.

- Supervision of social workers in IRS is regular but does not sufficiently focus on what is needed to progress planning for children. Risk is not routinely reviewed to inform decisions. Actions are identified. However, timescales are not always defined. Where there were deficits in cases seen, managers did not provide challenge.
- Senior managers understand well the strengths and areas for improvement in this part of the service. Performance management and quality assurance are embedded. This provides managers with a good oversight of frontline practice. Weekly audits review decision-making at the front door. External evaluation of practice has supplemented internal audit. Audits are used intelligently to identify additional thematic audit activity. Those seen by inspectors provide a greater depth of understanding of the quality of discrete areas of practice. Learning is embraced and disseminated through regular team meetings and informs future planning, including training. For example, training has already focused on improving assessments, child protection investigations, and management supervision. Further training is already planned in order to reinforce standards. Senior managers take assertive action when practice falls below standard.

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