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Dear Mr Stroyan

Focused visit to Darlington children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the focused visit to Darlington children's services on 24 October 2022 to 25 October 2023. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Nicki Shaw and Ceri Evans.

Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need and children subject to a protection plan. Inspectors considered the experiences and progress for children, the application of thresholds, and step-up and step-down arrangements.

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, including children's case discussions with social workers. They also looked at local authority performance management and quality assurance information and children's case records.

Overview

Senior leaders have ensured a relentless focus on continuing to improve the experiences of children who need help and protection in Darlington. Leaders have developed a workforce culture that is helping to develop and sustain high-quality social work practice. Comprehensive performance information, and quality assurance activity, helps leaders to understand child experience and progress. This leads to robust child-centred responses to identified risk and need.

Relationships with partners are a particular strength. This is enabling professionals to engage in effective multi-agency information-sharing which informs decision-making and sound planning for children. The principles of family group conferences are strongly evidenced in this practice area. This is helping parents and their wider family network to safely take responsibility for decision-making where appropriate.

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

- The quality, recording and frequency of supervision provided for social workers.
- The quality and consistency of management oversight to drive forward children's plans.

Main findings

Children in need and those subject to a child protection plan in Darlington receive timely and effective interventions and support from committed social workers. Social workers understand risk, need and vulnerability factors for children. They undertake detailed assessments of children's needs and their wider family to understand children's lived experiences. This leads to effective multi-agency plans and support to reduce risk and need. Specialist assessments are commissioned to inform the analysis of risk when necessary. This is progress since the last inspection, when the timeliness and quality of assessments was an area for improvement.

Strategy discussions are convened swiftly to respond to immediate and escalating risk. These are well attended by partner agencies. Information-sharing informs decisions and effective planning for children. Decisions to progress to child protection conferences are timely, and ensure that children receive the right level of help and protection at the right time. Children benefit from interim safety planning to reduce risk and help keep children safer while child protection conferences are convened.

Children's plans, including those for disabled children, are detailed and appropriately focused on risk and need. Plans are SMART, and describe what help is needed, who will provide support, and timescales for improvement are clearly defined. Children's plans include contributions from multi-agency partners and clearly explain what parents need to do differently to reduce risk.

There is a strong emphasis on including the wider family network as part of contingency plans should risk escalate, or where progress is not achieved or sustained. Family group conferences are routinely convened to help the family network to find sustainable solutions to secure positive outcomes for children. The voice of children is evident in most plans, and this is well informed by regular, creative direct work by social workers. Inspectors saw strong evidence of children and families being supported and, for some children, cared for safely within kinship arrangements.

Children's plans are reviewed regularly and clearly record measures of progress. Reviews are, in the main, attended by families and multi-agency professionals who share information to inform decision-making and planning for children. When key partners do not consistently attend, this is appropriately escalated by managers to the relevant agency. Parents' views are well captured in meeting minutes.

The preferred practice model is evident in social work interventions. Social workers are tenacious in developing and sustaining trusting relationships with children and their families. Visits to children are purposeful. They take place in line with the child's needs, although children's views are not always reflected in the recording of some visits.

When assessments are allocated to social workers, management direction is clear. While management oversight continues, and sign-off of assessment and plans is evident on children's files, this does not provide written challenge and onward direction to social workers to help them progress children's plans. Supervision takes place regularly and social workers feel well supported by their managers, but this is not always well reflected in children's case records.

There has been a strong focus by senior leaders to create a workforce culture that promotes collaboration and effective relationships with parents, carers and professionals. Leaders are committed to sustaining conditions that enable good social work to flourish. Social workers benefit from visible, approachable and responsive leaders and managers. Social workers told inspectors that they feel valued and very well supported.

Stability in the workforce has been sustained since the last inspection. The low turnover rates mean that children can form and sustain meaningful and consistent relationships with their workers. Due to an increased demand for help and protection services, some social workers have high caseloads. While currently there is no detriment to the quality of practice, this is due to the commitment of individual social workers. This has the potential to have a negative impact on the quality of relationships that social workers have with children and their families if it continues, and may undermine the values and principles of the preferred practice model that leaders have worked so hard to create.

Senior leaders are acutely aware of the challenges and demands across the social work teams. They have active recruitment campaigns and strong political support to further strengthen the workforce. Monitoring of caseloads is a leadership priority. Weekly caseload reviews are undertaken, and resources are moved around to respond to spikes in demand and to ensure that social workers can safely manage and prioritise their work.

Senior leaders routinely explore practice through robust oversight of case work. They have an accurate understanding of the quality of practice and children's experiences. Audit activity supports this function. The audit tool is comprehensive and well structured, and focused on the impact for children and their outcomes. Its effectiveness is undermined, as while it provides senior leaders with assurances about the quality of practice, it is not used collaboratively with social workers to set clear actions to improve practice where this is needed. Leaders are aware that quality assurance processes need to be further strengthened. They have very recently appointed a head of quality and practice to develop and progress plans to address these shortfalls.

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

Yours sincerely

Nicki Shaw
His Majesty's Inspector