

6 March 2017

Mr Alex Hopkins
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Dear Mr Hopkins

Monitoring visit of Sunderland City Council children's services

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit of Sunderland City Council children's services on 2 and 3 February 2017. This monitoring visit was carried out by Fiona Millns, Ofsted Inspector and Mary Candlin, Her Majesty's Inspector.

The visit was the third since the local authority was judged to be inadequate overall, in July 2015, at the inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers.

The local authority is making steady progress from an extremely low baseline.

Areas covered by the visit

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress made in respect of children looked after and achieving permanence. Areas of focus included:

- Decision-making for children to become looked after
- The effectiveness of the Public Law Outline (PLO)
- Whether children who become looked after have legal security within timescales appropriate to their needs and decisions for permanence agreed by the time of their second looked after review
- The quality of children's experiences
- The quality of social work practice, assessment and planning
- The quality of management oversight and scrutiny in driving forward children's plans
- The timeliness of children's reviews and the effectiveness of the independent reviewing officers (IROs).

During their visit, inspectors considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, supervision records, observations of social work practice and performance information provided by staff and managers. Inspectors spoke with parents, carers and children, as well as a range of staff, including managers, social workers and IROs.

Summary of findings

- Senior managers have responded well to the recommendations made following the single inspection in 2015.
- The local authority self-assessment honestly and accurately represents current service provision in relation to the scope of this monitoring visit.
- Performance management and quality assurance arrangements have an appropriate focus on key issues. Data and audit findings demonstrate improved performance in many areas of practice in respect of children looked after. However, the local authority acknowledges that there is now a need to focus on the quality of social work practice and improve auditing processes to ensure a consistent approach.
- The number of children looked after is still above the national average. However, decisive action has been taken to review practice in respect of children accommodated under section 20, and numbers are reducing appropriately.
- The timeliness of statutory visits to children by social workers has significantly improved. However, the quality of recording remains inconsistent and does not always clearly link to the plans for children.
- The number of children who have had a change in social worker has appreciably reduced since the SIF inspection, and children are able to develop more positive and supportive relationships with social workers. Overall, children, parents and carers spoke positively about the support that they now receive from social workers.
- The IRO service is more visible, and performance is improved. However, the impact of the changes in practice is yet to be seen fully. Inspectors found that while IROs increasingly challenge poor practice the influence of this action on the quality and effectiveness of assessments and planning for children remains limited.
- Permanent placements for children are identified and tracked as they progress through the PLO. However, the tracker does not clarify the reasons for delays in informing and improving practice, and this limits its usefulness.
- There have been improvements in the quality and timeliness of assessments for court proceedings despite the relatively high demand. However, the poor

quality of work in some cases and lack of rigour in monitoring continue to impede the pace of progress in this area.

- While improvements can be seen in social work practice, there remain deficits in the quality of assessments and children's plans. In particular, some assessments lack analysis and full consideration of risk. The subsequent plans do not include timescales or identify who was responsible for the specified actions.
- Team manager oversight of social work practice is not consistently focused on driving improvements in the quality of practice. The rationale for decision-making is not always clearly recorded.
- Supervision is more timely. However, it is not always reflective and does not clearly demonstrate case direction, decisions and actions to improve and progress work with individual children.
- Social workers feel supported by managers. There is improved stability. The majority of staff in the permanence teams are permanent.
- Caseloads for social workers have reduced, and social workers said that they are manageable.

Evaluation of progress

The evidence gathered during this third monitoring visit demonstrated steady progress and improvement from a very low baseline.

The senior management team has a clear focus on the key priorities for improvement in delivering services for children looked after in Sunderland. The self-assessment identifies the key issues and actions required to ensure and sustain improvement. Importantly, the local authority recognises the need to improve the quality of social work practice, through consistent and rigorous auditing with regard to the recording of statutory visits, effectiveness of assessments and rigour of plans. Consequently, the local authority has introduced additional performance indicators within the improvement board data set. Audits submitted as part of the monitoring visit overall highlighted the key issues on children's case files and provided a good balance between quality of practice and outcomes for children. However, the quality of auditing was variable.

Management oversight lacks rigour and consistency. Decision-making is not always recorded clearly in the electronic recording system. This has been identified by the local authority as an area for improvement. Monthly performance clinics and fortnightly performance meetings have been introduced with senior managers and staff. Data can be drilled down to identify individual workers and children, and this is helping to embed the expectations for performance. The implementation of the new electronic recording system later this year will further enhance performance monitoring.

Staff morale in Sunderland is good and there are reduced sickness levels and stability within teams, which help to support good practice of social workers and to build relationships with children and carers. Staff with whom inspectors spoke feel well supported through more structured supervision and report that senior management direction is much clearer. Overall, children, parents and carers spoke positively about the support that they receive and welcome the stability and consistency of having the same worker. Statutory social work visits are timely overall. However, the recording of the supervision seen did not consistently provide an analytical overview of the children's cases and clear case direction or demonstrate reflective practice. These issues had recently been identified by senior managers, and recent supervision training has been provided.

The number of children looked after in Sunderland remains high. However, there have been notable improvements in performance for children looked after. The local authority has sought to safely reduce the number of children accommodated in the local authority's care, and, when necessary, legal permanence is secured through the courts. Significantly, the number of children accommodated under section 20 has reduced by almost half since May 2015, in particular those children who have most recently become looked after. However, inspectors found some delay in achieving permanence in children's cases where neglect is a feature, resulting in drift and a lack of effective intervention. This may, in part, be attributed to a legacy of poor practice.

While assessments have improved in quality and timeliness and some good examples were seen, practice is not consistent. Some assessments lack analysis, and full consideration of the risks for the child and issues of identity were not addressed well. Plans are not effective tools in driving improvements in outcomes for children. Assessments do not inform plans, and the majority of plans seen did not identify who was responsible for taking action or timescales for the actions to be completed. In addition, contingency planning is not always clear.

The PLO tracker monitors the key stages of the process, but there is no clear recording of reasons for delays in the progress of cases. This does not assist in the overview of practice and in the identification of trends, in particular with regards to completion of assessments for court. While the timelines and quality of assessments for court are improving and enhanced by improved communication between social workers, IROs and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), management oversight of team managers and IROs is not yet consistently focused on improving the quality of work.

Since the last inspection, the IRO service has had an increase in staff and an additional manager to improve performance and practice. IROs now routinely undertake midway reviews on children's cases, to improve the tracking of children's plans and, importantly, to ensure that plans for permanence are in place by the time of the second review. An IRO scorecard has been developed to monitor performance. The IRO service has a higher profile across the local authority area through

representation on the Local Safeguarding Children Board and through individual IROs being attached to specific social work teams. However, it is still too early to see the full effect of these changes, and in children's cases tracked it was not always clear what impact the IRO was having.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely,

Fiona Millns

Ofsted Inspector