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Dear Ms Butcher

Focused visit to Middlesbrough children's services

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills is leading Ofsted's work into how England's social care system has delivered child-centred practice and care within the context of the restrictions placed on society during the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic.

This letter summarises the findings of a focused visit to Middlesbrough children's services on 26 and 27 May 2021. Her Majesty's Inspectors were Jan Edwards, Victoria Horsefield, Alison Smale, Kathryn Grindrod and Michele Costello.

The methodology for this visit was in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. However, the delivery model was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 context. This visit was carried out remotely. Inspectors used video calls for discussions with local authority staff, carers, key stakeholders and young people. The lead inspector and the director of children's services agreed arrangements to deliver this visit effectively while working within national and local guidelines for responding to COVID-19.

What needs to improve in this area of social work practice

In addition to the serious and widespread weaknesses identified at the December 2019 inspection, the following areas for improvement were identified at this visit:

- Management oversight and actions to ensure that vulnerable children and children in care, including those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), receive their full educational entitlement.

- The understanding of identity and the diverse needs of children and their families to inform assessment, planning and support.

Findings

- Middlesbrough leaders invoked their major incident plan swiftly and effectively at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This established a framework for the identification and monitoring of vulnerable children in their local communities. The pandemic has brought opportunities for a different way of working across the whole council, which has revitalised partnerships. The director of children's care and director of education held weekly communication meetings with strategic partners to develop effective multi-agency pathways, such as weekly meetings with school networks, and the domestic abuse pathway which is being nationally evaluated.
- Since the inspection in December 2019, senior leaders have been positively engaged in a comprehensive programme of improvement. Leaders have a good understanding of what they have achieved and of what more there is to do. While they have been able to successfully progress much of their programme of improvement during the pandemic, the pace of change of some elements of the programme has been impacted by COVID-19. These elements have been incorporated into the year two plan for improvement. The director of children's services and the leadership team know that there remains significant variability in practice, confirmed by this visit.
- Leaders have introduced and built on a comprehensive audit to excellence programme, enhanced performance management, and demand forecasting. There are also new practice standards to provide clearer expectations or 'non-negotiables' about the quality of social work practice. An analysis of thresholds for intervention and capacity has led to an increase in children's cases that are now appropriately held at early help. This is beginning to have an impact on workloads but capacity remains a challenge across the service. Senior leaders know, through their own audits, that too much work remains of variable quality and is still being evaluated as poor and not meeting their own expectations regarding the quality of practice. The audit to excellence framework successfully builds in learning from audit, with clear links to individual team planning, wider service improvements and performance clinics. Social workers and early help practitioners provided inspectors with examples of how they had made positive changes to their practice as a result of their learning from audit.
- Demand for a children's social care service has steadily increased over the last year. Referrals from the police account for just under half of all referrals to children's social care, although only half of these lead to the need for a service. This means that too many families are being referred by the police when they do not meet the threshold for a statutory service. This is exacerbated by a lack of an internal police system for determining thresholds of need. Senior leaders are now working with the police to adopt a new early triage, although the police have been slow to engage in this development.

- The multi-agency children's hub (MACH) has continued to strengthen and build on the improvements that had been identified at the monitoring visit in August 2020. Children's risks and needs are identified through a thorough screening process that is timely and proportionate. An increase in repeat referrals which lead to a need for a service is adding to the demand. This is as a result of a legacy of poor practice and children's assessments and interventions failing to address all the presenting concerns and risks the first time that children are referred.
- When risks to children increase, strategy meetings in the MACH are well attended. The meetings consider information from all partner agencies, who jointly rate the risk to children to support appropriate decision-making about next steps. However, when risks to children who are already known to the service escalate, there is a less robust process for strategy meetings. Decision-making is not always informed by all the available information from key partners, such as health professionals, as well as the historical information known to children's social care.
- There is effective management oversight when children's cases are stepped down to early help, and clear direction for the early help practitioner at the start of their intervention.
- Children are seen regularly, and throughout the pandemic social workers have taken into account specific COVID-19 safety plans when planning their visits. Some social workers are creative and persistent in their engagement with children, despite the restrictions imposed by lockdown measures. This direct work with children is demonstrably making a difference to their lives.
- The quality of social workers' assessments of children's needs varies. The better assessments articulate children's wishes and feelings well and consider the changes needed to improve their circumstances. In the poorer assessments, the direct work with children is not contributing to a clear understanding of what life is like for them. The child's identity and diverse needs are not given sufficient consideration to add to an understanding of their lived experience, and do not help to inform decisions that are made about them.
- Plans for children that are made following an assessment of need also vary in quality. Children-in-need plans are not regularly updated and lack clear timescales, which hinders the monitoring of children's progress. The lack of contingency planning in some children's cases means that social work practice is crisis-driven, leading to unnecessary escalation of risks for children. Child protection plans are generally of better quality than children-in-need plans, although they are not always specific to each child in the family. Multi-agency core group meetings do not always proactively ensure that the plan is progressed to achieve timely improvements to children's circumstances. Management oversight and supervision are not sufficiently evaluative of children's progress to ensure that plans and interventions are making a difference for children.

- Legal gateway meetings have been strengthened and are evidencing tighter management oversight and monitoring of pre-proceedings work under the Public Law Outline. However, some of these changes are very recent and are not yet demonstrating impact. Decisions for ending pre-proceedings are sometimes made without the benefit of an updated assessment or without clear contingency planning. This can lead to the risk that these children will re-enter the same processes quickly or that they are not diverted effectively from the need for care proceedings.
- Social workers are increasingly working with children who have multiple and complex needs. This is as a result of a legacy of poor practice, including a failure to intervene quickly when children are experiencing cumulative neglect and deprivation, and the impact of drift and delay in planning. The judiciary and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service are positive about the engagement of senior leaders in addressing the poor practice that they have raised with them. This includes the poor quality of social work in legal planning, the evidence submitted and the legal advice provided. Senior leaders have responded to the challenges of the quality of work in pre-proceedings and court proceedings through the recent appointment of a court progression manager. However, this initiative is too new to demonstrate impact.
- The number of children who are electively home educated (EHE) and missing education has significantly increased during the pandemic. Leaders have effective systems in place to monitor EHE children. These children are visited quickly, with a follow-up visit by the education welfare officer if the plan for the child's education is not good enough. However, senior leaders do not have a sufficient understanding of the circumstances of vulnerable children who are currently missing education. For instance, a minority of children in care have been on reduced timetables or have had no educational provision for too long. Some of these are children with SEND and additional vulnerabilities and risks and therefore their needs are not met; some of these children do not receive a school place within the recommended 20-day timescale; and a very small number of these children attend unregistered provision on a part-time basis for their sole education provision.
- Strategic and operational partners work together effectively to identify exploitation risks and trends for children in their communities. The tracking of children who are at risk of or who are being exploited continues until the risk is sufficiently reduced. There are clear and comprehensive procedures in place for children who are missing from home or care. Workers are persistent and build good relationships with children, which ensures that the interventions provided are effective in reducing risk and episodes of children being missing from home or care.
- The small number of children inspectors looked at who had recently come into care did so when they needed to be looked after, and included young people who were homeless. However, for some children, there is delay in finding the right home for them. This is in part due to the lack of availability of suitable foster and

children's homes, and insufficient scrutiny of the longer-term appropriateness of placements with connected carers. As a result, some children experience disruption when they are initially placed with family carers and this adds to their experience of loss and instability.

- Some children experience drift and delay in being found a permanent home and in having their more complex needs met. Children's care plans and the review of these plans are not sufficiently detailed to ensure that children's needs are met as quickly as they should be. Furthermore, children's needs arising from their identity and culture are not fully considered in planning the support that they receive, and this is a significant gap.
- While children's physical health needs are well met, their emotional well-being and mental health needs are not always understood well enough. Services are identified but interventions are not tailored to individual need and this limits their effectiveness. This means that some older children continue to experience an escalation in trauma and anxiety, which impacts on their relationships, placement stability and education.
- It is positive that the number of vulnerable children living in unregistered children's homes has reduced in the last six months. There is robust senior management oversight for the small number of children and care leavers in unregulated placements.
- Personal advisers maintain regular contact with care leavers. They are creative in how they engage with care leavers if face-to-face visiting is not possible. However, pathway plans for care leavers are too vague and lack ambition in planning for their future. Plans to help them address their health issues can sometimes take too long to action. The location of a child and adolescent mental health services worker within the pathways service is having a positive impact on the mental and emotional health of the young people who access that support.
- Leaders acknowledge that there are still too many care leavers who are not in education, employment or training (NEET). The recent introduction of a NEET clinic is starting to have an impact for care leavers. Care leavers who spoke to inspectors said that they appreciated the opportunities that their local authority apprenticeships have given them.
- Leaders have appropriately prioritised recruitment and the development of the workforce strategy. Although social workers' workloads are reducing, they remain too high for some social workers, particularly in the safeguarding and care planning and pathway teams. In addition, some children experience too many changes of social worker. Children told inspectors that, if they could change anything, they would like to have social workers who stayed with them for a long time. Too many changes of social worker affects relationship-building, as well as an understanding of children's circumstances and needs and the progression of children's plans.
- Staff have benefited from COVID-19 safe-working practices and the deployment of technology to maintain their engagement with children and families. Despite

the challenges of the last year, staff reported feeling well supported, and that they liked working for Middlesbrough and understood the vision for change.

Ofsted will take the findings from this focused visit into account when planning your next inspection or visit. I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Jan Edwards
Her Majesty's Inspector