

North Somerset Council

Report to the Executive

Date of Meeting: 21 October 2020

Subject of Report: Ofsted Report and Draft Improvement Plan

Town or Parish: All

Officer/Member Presenting: Sheila Smith, Director, People and Communities

Key Decision: No

Reason:

This report covers the outcome of Ofsted's Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) which was completed in April this year.

Recommendations

1. That Executive note the Ofsted report and the initial Improvement Plan which has been submitted to Ofsted.
2. That Executive seek a further report identifying the resources necessary to implement fully the Improvement Plan after the Plan has been accepted by Ofsted.
3. That Executive note and agree the internal and external scrutiny and challenge arrangements.

1. Summary of Report

Ofsted inspected significant parts of North Somerset's Children's Services during March 2020 and concluded that overall, they continue to 'Require improvement to be good.' They inspected three separate areas:

- The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families - Requires improvement to be good
- The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection - Requires improvement to be good
- The experience and progress of children in care and care leavers - Good

The report summary notes:

At the last inspection in 2017, children's services required improvement to be good. A focused visit in March 2019 found weaknesses at the front door, as well as high numbers of children who required an allocated social worker. In addition, performance management arrangements were not helping the local authority to understand sufficiently the quality and impact of its services on children.

While senior leaders have developed plans to address recommendations and areas for improvement. Improvement activity is disjointed and is not always appropriately

prioritised. Senior leaders have been successful in stabilising the workforce, and workloads have reduced in many parts of the service. They have still to achieve consistency in the quality of practice across all service areas. Senior leaders have appropriately developed a performance management system, but this does not, systematically and comprehensively inform leaders' understanding of the quality and impact of practice on children.

Children's overall experiences remain too variable, particularly for children in need of help and protection and some care leavers. Managers and social workers are not making consistently good decisions for all children. As a result, some children do not receive help at the earliest opportunity. However, the experiences and progress of children in care have improved since the last inspection. Children mostly come into care when they should. Childhood trauma, and its impact on the longer-term emotional well-being of children in care, is thoroughly considered. The vast majority of children in care live in stable homes that meet their needs.

What needs to improve

- The effectiveness, and management oversight, of decision-making when children first come to the attention of the local authority.
- The quality of analysis in assessments, including the impact of children's situations on their health and development.
- Management oversight and supervision of the progress of children's plans.
- Formalised matching of children with their long-term carers.
- Access to the drop-in for older children in care and care leavers who are working or who are in full-time education or employment.
- Use of performance management information to systematically inform leaders' understanding of the quality and impact of practice for children.

2. Policy

All upper tier local authorities are subject to regular inspections of their children's services by Ofsted. This is usually at least three yearly although the previous full inspection was undertaken in June 2017. Since that time North Somerset had a local SEND (Special Education Needs and Disability) inspection undertaken jointly by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission (CQC) in May 2019 and a focused visit looking at the first point of contact for children who need help and protection in March 2019.

3. Details

The full Ofsted report is attached to this report but set out below are the areas of strength that were identified alongside more detail on the areas for improvement.

Children in Need of Help and Protection

Areas of strength

- One Front Door (domestic abuse referrals)
- Local Authority Designated Officer role, dealing with allegations of abuse against adults who work with children
- Strategy Discussions during investigations of possible significant harm
- Public Law Outline work with families before initiating care proceedings in the courts
- Response to homelessness
- Our support for children who are disabled

Still work to do to improve

- Early Help - Generally good, but more work to do for our older children.
- Front Door - Although systems and processes have improved since the focused visit the quality of initial decision-making by the front door team remains too variable.
- Assessments and Plans – Variable plans but assessments are detailed and capture children’s wishes and feelings following thoughtful, direct work but they need to be more analytical. Inspectors liked our new One Plan, which needs further embedding
- Risk of Exploitation - Early recognition of children at risk of exploitation is not consistent. Once risk is known and support is in place, effective multi-agency working by frontline professionals results in appropriate actions being taken to reduce risk
- Return home interviews after young people have gone missing – Timely, but variable quality
- Private Fostering – Timeliness at the beginning needs to be improved but once the suitability of the arrangement is confirmed, children are seen regularly by social workers, and they receive appropriate help and support that meet their needs.
- Consistency of threshold alongside management oversight and supervision
- Electively home educated children appropriately identified. We rightly challenge schools to ensure that they are appropriately supporting parents’ decision-making but there is missed opportunity to assure children’s safety in the longer term

Children Looked after and Care leavers

Areas of strength

- Decisions for children to come into our care
- Turning the Tide
- Care plans and permanence
- Reviews
- Social workers direct work/ visits/ child’s voice
- Children’s records – children’s wishes and feelings
- Health assessments – trauma informed work
- Education and learning, access to activities
- Children and young people’s understanding of why they are in care and life story work
- Family Time
- Our decisions around where children live
- Our decisions and support for where our care leavers live
- Care leavers - the local authority is in touch with almost all care leavers. The drop-in centre provides a highly responsive service that is valued by the young people who use it. A generous, inclusive approach means that young people, including those placed by other local authority areas, can benefit from access to support if they live in North Somerset. At the drop-in centre, young people get instant and helpful support at times of crisis.
- The local offer

Still work to do to improve

- All children having a health passport and being aware of it
- Process for matching children to long term foster carers
- Transfer to Care leaving team
- Pathway plans
- Drop in for care leavers who are working

- Education employment and training
- LCPAs use of local offer

Leadership and Management

Areas of strength

- Children's workforce - reduction in agency workers
- Good purposeful relationships with partners
- Successful in developing and delivering some good-quality services, particularly for children in care and care leavers. Eg the high-quality intensive work undertaken by the Consult team to meet children's emotional well-being needs; the drop-in centre, which is highly valued by care leavers who access it; and the implementation of the 'mocking bird' model to support foster carers, which is helping to increase the stability of children's placements
- Relationship-based and trauma-informed practice is particularly strong in North Somerset, which means that social workers are mostly confident in their practice and are equipped to support children and families.
- The Bright Spots survey provides an effective means of collating the views of children in care
- The new political leadership and new chief executive have appropriately prioritised children in the updated corporate plan, and they have also strengthened governance arrangements to better hold the director of children's services (DCS) to account. Children's services have also seen financial investment, mostly to alleviate known pressures. Some areas, such as early help and the fostering service, have received crucial additional investment

Still work to do to improve

- Corporate parenting
- The multi-agency safeguarding children partnership, replacing the North Somerset safeguarding children board, is in its infancy,
- Independent scrutiny arrangements are still to be determined.
- Coordination of improvement activity
- QA activity
- Formal process for monitoring children requiring CAMHS, Adoption
- Strategic oversight of risk of exploitation

4. Consultation

We are required to produce an Improvement Plan which has been sent to Ofsted and we await their feedback. We have had conversations with colleagues from the Department for Education (DfE), North Tyneside Council, who are our Partners in Practice and the Local Government Association all of whom have contributed their views to our emerging Improvement Plan. This is in addition to workshops with service leaders within Children's Support and Safeguarding and initial contributions from a sub group of the CYPS Scrutiny Panel, and agency partners across the police, health and schools.

The DfE are concerned that whilst there were some improvements, the local authority continues to 'require improvement' and so have appointed Alastair Gibbons as our Improvement Adviser to provide a 'critical friend' role in regard to our improvement journey. Alastair retired recently from his post as Director of Operations in Birmingham's Children's Trust. Prior to the move of children's services into the Trust Alastair led Birmingham Children's Services on a significant improvement journey over a period of three years such

that they achieved an Ofsted outcome of 'Requires improvement' after a ten year period of being graded 'Inadequate'.

Whilst the Chief Executive already chaired an internal board with a focus on the quality of practice in Children's Support and Safeguarding which had both the Leader and the Lead Member for Children's Services and Lifelong Learning as members, we recognised that this needed more external challenge and so have broadened the membership to include practitioners, partners, the DfE and the LGA.

5. Financial Implications

Some of the workstreams will require additional resourcing but it is too early to quantify the level although this will be the subject of the next report to the Executive when we receive sign off of the Improvement Plan. The significant piece of work on our Early Help offer and the Front door to services is being undertaken through our work with North Tyneside and their participation is entirely funded by the DfE as we 'require improvement.' Additional work is about to begin in respect of a LGA Peer Review of our SEND services which will be funded by the LGA alongside support from them to our Corporate Parenting Board and our Scrutiny Panel sub group who will be scrutinising the progress and impact of our Improvement Plan.

Costs

This is work in progress as outlined above.

Funding

See above.

6. Legal Powers and Implications

Children's Services operate within a very clear legal framework and are inspected by Ofsted in regard to how they carry out their statutory responsibilities in relation to children, young people and their families. Should a local authority be judged to be 'Inadequate' by Ofsted then there exists a legal framework within which the running of such services could be taken away from the local authority.

7. Climate Change and Environmental Implications

This report focuses on the outcome of the recent Ofsted inspection and as such there are no areas for improvement which would impact on the environment generally or specifically the climate.

8. Risk Management

Safeguarding children is one of the key responsibilities for local authorities and as such is logged in our Corporate risk register, with appropriate mitigations.

9. Equality Implications

Have you undertaken an Equality Impact Assessment? No.

There are no decisions contained in this report however it relates to our services to vulnerable children, young people and their families who are in receipt of social care services. There are no proposals to reduce or change those services such that there would be a diminution – on the contrary the Improvement Plan seeks to improve the quality of our services and so improve the outcomes for our service users.

10. Corporate Implications

The Chief Executive and the Leader of the Council recognise the importance of leading this improvement work and holding the Director of Children's Services to account. They will be involved in future discussions and challenges in regard to the resourcing of the plan, the pace of change and future outcomes, as will all colleagues involved in providing services across the council to children and families.

11. Options Considered

None.

Author:

Sheila Smith, Director, People and Communities

Appendices:

Ofsted report 'Inspection of children's social care services', 2 March 2020 to 13 March 2020
<https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/50151810>.

Plan for Continuous Improvement of Services for Children, Young People & Families
2020 – 2022.

Background Papers:

See appendices above.