

North Somerset Council

Report to the Executive

Date of Meeting: December 7th 2022

Subject of Report: Ofsted Focused Visit letter

Town or Parish: All

Officer/Member Presenting: Executive Member, Children's Services, Lifelong Learning and Skills

Key Decision: No

Reason: Information item on Ofsted visit

Recommendations

That Members note the contents of the letter.

That Members note the progress to date and the work still needed.

1. Summary of Report

In September 2022 Ofsted undertook a Focused Visit (FV) wherein Inspectors looked at the local authority's arrangements for the 'front door', which is the point at which the local authority, alongside other agencies, considers and responds to referrals about children who may be in need or at risk of harm.

2. Policy

All local authority Children's Services are inspected by Ofsted and as part of the programme they undertake Focused Visits in between their full inspections, the frequency of which depends on their judgement of how well a local authority is serving its children and families. Rather than a graded judgement a FV results in a letter which may contain areas for priority action and increasingly the Department for Education (DfE) are issuing Improvement Notices where this is the case.

3. Details

Since the Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) in March 2020 when Ofsted judged us as 'Requires Improvement to be Good' we have had two FVs and two Annual Engagement Meetings with Ofsted. In addition, the DfE agreed with us that we should have an Improvement Adviser. While they were satisfied that we were making progress and he finished his work in December 2021 he was clear that there was still some distance to go and identified several areas in addition to our social work practice where the Council needed to make progress. His estimate was that it would take a further two years post December 2021 to embed it.

In December 2021 Ofsted undertook a FV which looked at the local authority's arrangements for children in need, including those who are subject of a child protection plan. They identified four areas where we need to improve practice:

- The analysis and management of risk to children.
- Management oversight of safeguarding practice, including supervision of staff.
- The quality and timely implementation of plans for children.
- The quality assurance arrangements of social work practice

All these areas were already in the Children's Services Improvement Plan, but progress had been hampered by a focus on the realignment of the directorate and changes in key management posts.

In the most recent FV the Inspectors identified:

- The understanding of, and response to, children at risk of exploitation.
- The quality and depth of social work practice when children are in complex or chronic need.
- The quality assurance of decision-making in the front door.

Again, all of these are areas that had been identified internally and frustratingly the item relating to the quality assurance of decision-making at the front door had been diarised for in depth work earlier in the year but this had not been able to be progressed alongside other pieces of work.

Key messages from the Inspectors:

- We know ourselves well and provided them with an accurate picture of where we are and what we need to do
- They didn't see any areas of concern that we hadn't already identified in our plans
- Our Early Help Assessments are thorough with good use of research
- They could see that there is an increase in the pace of change across the whole service and this needs to continue
- Our work on the Front Door has taken too long and we need to accelerate the work on the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub
- They saw some really creative work in Family Wellbeing and Family Support and Safeguarding which was achieving positive outcomes for children
- They saw good management oversight at the beginning and end of assessments
- We need to be much more professionally curious and triangulate the information we receive by ensuring we consistently talk to family and friends, involved professionals and children and young people (where appropriate) to inform our decision making
- There are early signs of our Quality Assurance work becoming embedded but there needs to be more focused quality assurance done by teams within teams and informed by our performance information. This work needs to focus on day-to-day decision making and impact on children.
- We need to develop our multi-agency response to Child Exploitation and children missing including having a shared understanding of who these children are
- We need to seek more feedback from our children and families and involve them in service improvement

Our Annual Engagement Meeting with Ofsted will take place in January/February 2023 which provides opportunities for the local authority to evidence progress made since the FV and for Ofsted to challenge and triangulate information.

4. Consultation

This report provides information on a Focused Visit by Ofsted and so no consultation is required.

5. Financial Implications

Ofsted reference the lack of a specialist resource where young people are in complex and chronic conditions, particularly when at risk of exploitation. Given our Improvement Journey and the close external scrutiny we are under, officers concluded that this needed to be actioned.

Costs

The cost of a Senior Practitioner, including on costs is c £51k.

Funding

Ofsted identified the the lack of a specialist resource for children living in complex and chronic conditions as hampering the work we need to undertake at pace with children and young people at risk of criminal and sexual exploitation. Mindful of the current budgetary pressures the directorate senior leadership team have moved a combination of base and grant funding from other areas to create a fixed term, specialist role. This will become a budget pressure when the short-term funding expires because we know that the numbers of young people drawn into exploitation are increasing.

6. Legal Powers and Implications

Local authorities are required to ensure there is a timely, thorough response to children who might be in need of help or protection.

7. Climate Change and Environmental Implications

The FV examined the work of the 'front door' which comprises a great deal of communication via phones and Teams meetings: this increased during Covid and has been maintained so that there has been a decrease in the need for car travel. The team is located in the Town Hall although other teams whose work was scrutinised are based in the localities they serve.

8. Risk Management

There is a specific risk on the Strategic Risk Register: 'Risk that we do not deliver sustainable change in Children's Services at the right pace of the improvement journey.' This is kept under review at Corporate Leadership Team, Quartet meetings, Directorate Leadership Team, Service Leadership Team and Children's Quality Assurance and Performance Monitoring Board. There are several inter-dependencies including recruitment and retention of the workforce, budget pressures and effective partnership working.

9. Equality Implications

N/A.

10. Corporate Implications

None.

11. Options Considered

None.

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Appendices:



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Background Papers:

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