



Northumberland

County Council

Families and Children Overview and Scrutiny

5th August 2019

Ofsted Joint Targeted Area Inspection 17th - 21st June

Report of Executive Director of Adult Social Care & Children's Services, Cath McEvoy-Carr

Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Wayne Daley

1. Purpose of Report

To provide an overview of the Joint Targeted Area Inspection in relation to child sexual exploitation and criminal exploitation that took place in June 2019.

2. Background

Joint Targeted Area Inspections are multi-agency in focus and are designed to test out the partnership working in relation to a particular theme or topic. They involve Ofsted, CQC, HMIC and HMIP.

The process follows 3 key elements:

- Inspection of the multi-agency front door arrangements.
- Deep Dive looking at specific case files where multi-agency partners are involved.
- Overview of the strategic leadership and management across the partnership.

There is not a judgement attached to the inspection but rather a letter with a list of strengths and areas for development. Where practice is found to be concerning, there can be a requirement for 'Priority Areas for Action' which means immediate action needs to be taken.

In all cases an action plan has to be submitted to Ofsted following such an inspection although there is currently no monitoring of such plans.

3. Key Issues

- 3.1 The inspection found no Priority Areas for action within Northumberland and there were no cases where children were found to be at immediate risk of harm.

3.2 Multi-agency strengths include:

- The safeguarding agencies in Northumberland demonstrate a strong commitment to working together to safeguard children. They have made changes in response to findings from previous inspections, including the Ofsted focused visit in February 2018 that looked at the effectiveness of the front door arrangements to protect children.
- Several agencies, including health and education, are represented in the MASH. This aids information sharing and joint planning to reduce risks to children.
- Following challenge from the NCSB, a review of the processes for return home interviews has led to changes which are beginning to have a positive impact on informing safety plans for children.
- The Multi-agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) has effective systems in place which ensure that new concerns about children are responded to in a timely manner. In the main, thresholds are understood, and the risk of significant harm is identified. Timely strategy meetings are held and include the right professionals. This aids decision making.
- The introduction of a child sexual exploitation (CSE) practitioner in the MASH has been instrumental in raising the quality of risk assessment and safety planning for children who are identified as being at a high risk of sexual exploitation. Practitioners are increasingly considering extra familial risks to children in relation to sexual exploitation.
- Political support from elected members has ensured that resources for children's social care have been protected. Senior managers have worked hard to improve the workforce stability. The introduction of assistant team manager and advanced practitioner posts, as well as retaining social workers who undertake their assessed and supported year in employment year within the authority, is contributing to a more stable and increasingly experienced workforce. The number of social workers has increased in the last two years, and social workers describe their caseloads as manageable. Social workers receive regular supervision and management oversight of their work.
- All General Practices and schools in Northumberland routinely receive information through an initiative, Operation Endeavor, about children who are missing. This initiative strengthens information sharing about children and families of concern, as many children who are missing may not be known to early help services or children's social care. The appointment of a specialist MASH education worker further supports information sharing with schools, appropriately informing analysis of risk and planning for children. Harm reduction work has been proactive as a result of the

shared approach of partners recognising the vulnerability of children and underlying concerns. Inspectors saw examples where schools had passed intelligence to the Police as a result of their vigilant observation of who children were associating with outside of the school.

- The Missing, Slavery, Exploitation and Trafficking group (MSET) has been in place since March 2019, with the aim to provide a structured response, through the sharing of information, to reduce the risk of all forms of child exploitation. This replaces the previous Risk Management Group. The new arrangements are aligned with other Local Authorities in the region and Northumbria Police, who chair all the groups. Intelligence is mapped to create a detailed picture of risk to individual children and associated vulnerable people. The MSET process has supported active disruption operations, including a multi-agency operation that took place over a weekend. This has had a positive impact on reducing the numbers of children's missing episodes in one locality. This relatively new process has been successful in reducing risks for some children.
- Child protection (Section 47) enquiries are prompt and social workers see children alone. Social workers engage with children in a sensitive way to support them to tell their story. When children are at significant risk, there is timely escalation to initial child protection conferences.
- The NSCB undertakes regular multi-agency audits. A multi-agency audit in December 2018 into the safeguarding of disabled children led to the incorporation of the consideration of sexual exploitation into all assessments. The failure to include the consideration of criminal exploitation is a lost opportunity to further strengthen assessments for these children. Multi-agency audits completed by the partnership reflected the areas of development identified by inspectors during this inspection.
- The NCSB receive a wide range of performance data, which they interrogate and use to provide appropriate challenge. For example, an audit which focused on the application of thresholds within the MASH, in recognition that S47 rates were high, found that thresholds were understood. This demonstrates that action is taken to understand practice and to inform action to improve.

3.3 Case Study: Highly Effective Practice

- The local area has built on the embedded good practice of Operation Encompass by implementing Operation Endeavor. Every school and General Practice across the area receives missing children notifications. This initiative strengthens information sharing about children of concern and has resulted in proactive harm reduction work.
- Schools display a good understanding of risks to children of criminal exploitation. They have access to regular and up to date training, and can apply this effectively. School staff are proactive in ensuring the risks to children are mitigated while children are in school. Inspectors saw

examples of schools being vigilant about who children are associating with outside school and passing this intelligence on to the Police and other partners so that appropriate action could be taken.

3.4 Areas for Improvement include:

- The need for an intelligence profile of the criminal exploitation of children has recently been identified by leaders in the partnership and commissioned by the Police. The child sexual exploitation profile needs to be updated. This means that the ability of the partnership to understand the extent of child criminal exploitation in Northumberland is currently limited.
- The partnership has recently refreshed its strategy on child sexual exploitation to include criminal exploitation. However, the strategy and accompanying action plan are underdeveloped and are not informed by an up to date profile. This means that resources may not be sufficiently aligned to tackling child exploitation.
- The complex needs of children who offend because of child sexual exploitation and/or criminal exploitation are not sufficiently recognised or planned for in the refreshed strategy and action plan. This could result in the unnecessary criminalisation of children.
- Child criminal exploitation is not comprehensively understood by practitioners in all agencies across the partnership. Training, although in place, has not yet had a consistent impact on practice. This means that exploitation, other than child sexual exploitation, may not be recognised or responded to. In some cases, children's records showed that practitioners viewed children's behaviour as part of a lifestyle choice. This limits their ability to see children as victims of exploitation.
- The MASH receives referrals from partner agencies through a variety of formats, which means there is no single consistent approach. This means that trigger factors that present when a child is at risk of exploitation may be missed.
- Assessments are mostly timely. However, they are of a variable quality. Some do not include sufficient consideration of wider family and community networks. There is an overreliance on parents' self-reporting at times, and this is a missed opportunity to understand children's networks of support more thoroughly.
- The MSET processes require further development to ensure that all children are identified when they are at risk of criminal exploitation. Not all practitioners are able to fully identify the risk of child criminal exploitation, and this is impacting on their ability to complete the screening tool. A focus on the risk of child sexual exploitation means that some children who may be at risk from other forms of exploitation are scored as being at a low risk of harm. For some children, this can mean

that risk of harm from exploitation is underestimated or is not sufficiently well considered.

- Northumberland has a high rate of permanent exclusions from schools. The NSCB receives a comprehensive suite of performance data, including data on children missing education, children who are electively home educated and exclusions. However, the Board has not challenged agencies to further understand any links between increased risk to children permanently excluded and their vulnerability to exploitation. Following this inspection, they now plan to do so.

4. Next Steps

- Factual accuracy was completed and returned to Ofsted on 19th July 2019.
- Pre publication letter provided on 29th July 2019.
- Publication on the Ofsted website on 2nd August 2019.
- Action plan to be submitted on 11th November 2019.
- Comms around this has commenced in view of the fact it involves four agencies.

5. Author and Contact Details

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