

# Inspection of local authority arrangements for the protection of children

Stockton-on-Tees

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**Inspection dates:** 7 January to 16 January 2013

**Lead inspector** Neil Penswick

**Age group:** All

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# Inspection of local authority arrangements for the protection of children

## The inspection judgements and what they mean

1. All inspection judgements are made using the following four point scale.

Outstanding	a service that significantly exceeds minimum requirements
Good	a service that exceeds minimum requirements
Adequate	a service that meets minimum requirements
Inadequate	a service that does not meet minimum requirements

## Overall effectiveness

2. The overall effectiveness of the arrangements to protect children in Stockton-on-Tees is judged to be **adequate**.

## Areas for improvement

3. In order to improve the quality of help and protection given to children and young people in Stockton-on-Tees the local authority and its partners should take the following action.

### Immediately:

- strengthen management oversight, in the referral and assessment team, including regular audit of cases, to ensure that the system for risk assessment is embedded and effective
- ensure that performance on the timely completion of initial and core assessments is subject to a robust review and action taken to drive improvements in performance
- ensure that children and young people are always seen as part of an assessment of their needs.

### Within three months:

- review the screening of domestic abuse referrals to children's social care to ensure that there is effective risk assessment to reduce the number of inappropriate referrals
- ensure that all assessments of children, including the common assessment framework (CAF), give effective consideration to a child or young person's ethnicity, culture and religion, in order to inform

planning and interventions, and that children's views inform assessments and planning

- ensure the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) effectively challenges the council and partner agencies and addresses issues identified about the performance of services
- improve the quality, timeliness and recording of supervision to ensure consistent standards of practice across all teams in accordance with the authority's policy.

**Within six months:**

- improve the quality of case recording and ensure that chronologies are present on all cases
- ensure that the format for recording child protection plans is simplified so the key areas of risk are prioritised and parents and carers can understand what needs to happen to ensure that children are protected, and that outcomes and timescales are clearly set out within plans
- improve children and young people's access to advocacy services
- support and improve children's attendance at child protection conferences and core groups
- ensure that children and young people's views are sought and responded to in developing strategic plans and service improvements
- ensure a multi-agency early intervention strategy is in place to coordinate preventative services
- ensure that strategic plans identify the improvements in outcomes expected to be achieved and the timescales for these to be accomplished.

## About this inspection

4. This inspection was unannounced.
5. This inspection considered key aspects of a child's journey through the child protection system, focusing on the experiences of the child or young person, and the effectiveness of the help and protection that they are offered. Inspectors have scrutinised case files, observed practice and discussed the help and protection given to these children and young people with social workers, managers and other professionals including members of the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB). Wherever possible, they have talked to children, young people and their families. In addition the inspectors have analysed performance data, reports and management information that the local authority holds to inform its work with children and young people.
6. This inspection focused on the effectiveness of multi-agency arrangements for identifying children who are suffering, or likely to suffer, harm from abuse or neglect; and for the provision of early help where it is needed. It also considered the effectiveness of the local authority and its partners in protecting these children if the risk remains or intensifies.
7. The inspection team consisted of five of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI).
8. This inspection was carried out under section 136 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

## Service information

9. Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council is situated in the North East of England and is the largest unitary authority in the Tees Valley. It is a borough of contrasts with a mixture of busy town centres, urban residential areas and picturesque villages. In the Census 2011 the population was estimated at 191,600 living in 79,200 households. The Index of Multiple Deprivation 2010 shows that six of Stockton's wards are within the 10% most deprived wards nationally. However two wards are within the 10% least deprived wards nationally. There are 42,275 children and young people living in the borough and they make up 22.1% of the population. In the borough 2,800 children (aged 0-15) are from a minority ethnic background. The largest minority ethnic group is Asian or Asian British. 7.5% of children are from a minority ethnic background.
10. There are 73 local authority maintained schools, comprising 60 primary schools, 10 secondary schools, and three special schools. There are three independent schools. There are also two academies, three colleges and two university colleges. There are two pupil referral centres and one alternative education provider. Free school meals are provided to 19.21% of pupils.

11. Referrals to children's social care are received by the first contact team. Issues arising out of hours are dealt with by the emergency duty team (EDT): this service is provided by Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council on behalf of Darlington, Hartlepool, Middlesbrough and Redcar & Cleveland local authorities. Cases requiring initial and core assessment are passed to the referral and assessment team (RAT). If on-going involvement is required the case is transferred to one of six fieldwork teams who are responsible for on-going support to children in need, including children who are subject to a child protection plan. Services to disabled children are provided by the complex needs social work team. Early help for children and families is delivered by a range of in-house and commissioned services including children's centres, targeted youth support, young people's substance misuse services, a family support team and other specialist services for families and young carers.

## Overall effectiveness

12. The overall effectiveness of the arrangements to protect children in Stockton-on-Tees is adequate.
13. There is an effective range of early intervention services helping to reduce risks to children's safety. The council's children's centre provision has been recently reconfigured to improve their preventative role in child protection. Good partnership working between the council and Harbour, a local voluntary sector organisation, is helping to secure the safety and care of parents and children subject to domestic abuse. The quality of practice and use of the common assessment framework (CAF) is variable and take up low.
14. Thresholds for referral to children's social care are generally well understood by the partner agencies. However there has been a significant increase in the number of contacts received by the local authority children's social care. Contacts made to children's social care are appropriately screened by the First Contact service. There is, however, no joint screening of domestic abuse incidents by the police and children's social care resulting in a number of inappropriate referrals to children's social care.
15. Child protection cases are responded to promptly. However, there are significant delays when cases are identified as lower risk and needing a social care assessment in the RAT. Most of these cases have experienced some delay and in small number of instances families have waited several weeks for an assessment to commence, but no children were seen to be at immediate risk of significant harm through this practice. During the inspection, the council appropriately strengthened its response to these cases and took on additional social workers. However further work is needed to resolve the issues that resulted in the delays. The quality of assessments is variable. Inspectors also saw two cases where children and young people had not been seen as part of their assessment in the RAT. Limited attention is paid in assessments to diversity issues. There is limited recording of the views of children and young people in assessments, a low rate of attendance by them at relevant meetings and no formal advocacy support to assist them. However all of the parents spoken to during the inspection reported high levels of satisfaction with the help they receive.
16. Once work is allocated to the long term social care teams, support is at least of an adequate quality. Children are seen regularly and alone when required. Multi-agency meetings, such as strategy meetings, core groups and child protection conferences, are held and appropriate plans to protect them and enhance the quality of their lives put in place. Most individual plans to protect children are detailed but there is a lack of



identification of expected outcomes and timescales to complete the work. The quality of case recording is variable and chronologies are not always completed. There are good arrangements in place for the management of referrals out of hours.

17. The safeguarding of children and young people is effectively prioritised in Stockton-on-Tees and there is an agreement not to reduce the budget in this important area of work. A multi-agency Health and Well Being Board has been operational since 2011 and through these arrangements there is strategic coordination of the work to improve children's lives. There is no strategy for early intervention work resulting in a lack of coordination of these services. Inspectors saw examples of good work but also some gaps in provision and duplication of services for vulnerable families.
18. The LSCB meets its statutory duties and in some areas of its work is highly effective. Good learning from serious case reviews (SCRs) undertaken in other authorities has resulted in local action plans and raised awareness. The Business Plan is good with a high level of analysis. However some of the plans for further improvement are insufficiently focused on how the work will improve outcomes for children. Performance management and evaluation is not wholly effective. Despite good processes in the council to manage performance and good work in the LSCB the weaknesses within children's social care, such as the timeliness of assessments and the delays following referrals, have not been scrutinised. There is also no organised approach to seeking and learning from the views of children and young people.
19. Social work staff have annual appraisals, linked to a highly appreciated training programme and with good opportunities for career progression. There is too much inconsistency in management oversight and quality and frequency of supervision. There is a good workload management scheme which ensures an equitable and manageable caseload. Workforce planning is highly effective. There is a good approach to developing staff from the local community and also good links with local universities.

## **The effectiveness of the help and protection provided to children, young people, families and carers**

### **Adequate**

20. The effectiveness of help and protection provided to children, young people and their families and carers is adequate. There is an effective range of early intervention services that demonstrate good partnerships at an operational level. Inspectors saw many examples of effective practical work and early help to families and to children in need, both from the council and from services commissioned in the private and voluntary sector. For example, actions taken by the recently developed family

support team and the well-established family intervention programme team are ensuring that families are supported well in times of crisis. This is helping to reduce risks to children's safety and improve the care provided.

21. The council's children's centre provision has been recently reconfigured to provide targeted support with a clear role in improving their preventative role in child protection. In the last two years Ofsted inspections have judged 80% of children's centres inspected as good. Good partnership working and effective lines of communication are common strengths identified in the inspection reports.
22. Good partnership working between the council and Harbour (formerly North Tees Women's Aid) is helping to secure the safety and care of parents and children subject to domestic abuse. Targeted work with families at risk of statutory interventions through a 'family programme' has resulted in improved outcomes for children. The multi-agency 'Vulnerable, Exploited, Missing and Trafficked' (VEMT) task group reporting to the LSCB, identifies cases of high concern and coordinates the response effectively. The sharing of intelligence and targeted actions has helped to reduce risk and improve the support to individual children. Good work by the attendance and exclusion services and the school advisory service, including regular home visits, also makes sure that children whose parents have chosen to educate their children at home are safe.
23. The quality of practice and use of the CAF is variable but adequate overall. An evaluation by the council in 2011 of the use of CAFs identified the need to improve their effectiveness in identifying families in need at the earliest possible stage. In 2012 the CAF was re-launched with a small dedicated team to coordinate and drive the improvements required; this has yet to evidence impact.
24. Head teachers, health visitors, midwives, parent support and family intervention workers spoken to during the inspection consider the CAF is providing a good mechanism for bringing together teams of specialists to support families in times of need through a 'team around the child' (TAC) or 'team around the family' (TAF) approach. All report that this is helping to keep children safe and meet family's needs in a timely, multi-agency way.
25. Most CAFs provide a detailed review of family circumstances. Plans clearly identify the actions to be taken. However, they are not sufficiently focused on what difference this will make for children. While the consent of parents is appropriately secured by agencies prior to commencing CAF assessments, few incorporate the views of the children and young people and this is a weakness.
26. Over the last five years there has been a 65% increase in the number of contacts received annually by social care. Council statistics evidence that

there is also a significant variation in the numbers received each month. Despite this increase, contacts made to children's social care are appropriately screened by the First Contact service. Decisions whether to close or to instigate an assessment are made promptly and appropriately.

27. Thresholds for referral to children's social care are generally well understood by partner agencies. Scrutiny of the application of thresholds by partner agencies takes place appropriately at the multi-agency CAF board and LSCB on a regular basis. There is no joint screening of domestic abuse incidents by the police and children's social care resulting in a number of inappropriate referrals to children's social care to carry out an assessment.
28. Child protection cases are responded to promptly and effectively by the RAT. However, there are significant delays when cases are identified as lower risk and needing a social care assessment. Most cases experience some delay and in some instances families have waited several weeks for an assessment to commence. Inspectors found the council's own mechanism to evaluate and review these cases was not robust. During the inspection, the council responded to the issues and appropriately strengthened its response to these cases and took on additional social workers.
29. Once work is allocated to one of the six field work teams or the children with complex needs team, the support offered is at least of an adequate quality and examples were seen by inspectors of good work resulting in improvements in children's lives. Children are seen regularly and alone when needed, multi-agency meetings, such as core groups and child protection conferences, are held and appropriate plans to protect children and enhance the quality of their lives put in place. A relatively low number of children have been subject to a child protection plan for more than two years or to repeated plans. These long term teams are working with a significant number of children in need cases evidencing the council's intention to ensure that children and families are not subjected unnecessarily to formal child protection processes.
30. The quality of recording is variable, although most case recording seen by inspectors was up to date. Chronologies are not consistently completed and up to date on case files so that it is not always possible to easily gather background information. Social workers and managers report that they find the electronic recording system easy to use and effective in supporting them in their work. Almost all records are held electronically meaning that information on cases is readily available.

## The quality of practice

### Adequate

31. The quality of practice is adequate. Children and young people referred to children's social care consistently receive a prompt response from the First Contact team. Appropriate consideration is given to their needs with relevant agencies consulted and previous history taken into account to inform decisions about whether a further assessment is needed. Children requiring an immediate child protection response are appropriately prioritised.
32. Child protection and early help services for children and young people in the main meet national guidance and there are some examples of good work. Services for children in need of immediate protection are robust. However the timeliness of the response by children's social care to those children who are not in urgent need of protection is too variable.
33. All child protection enquiries, including those in the complex needs team are carried out by qualified social workers and are conducted thoroughly with full background checks and evaluation of information and observations. Strategy meetings are mostly timely, very well attended by partner agencies and well recorded. Actions resulting from the meetings are clearly recorded as are agency responsibilities for actions. There are good arrangements in place for the management of referrals out of hours. The out of hours emergency duty service is staffed by experienced social workers who have good access to the day time electronic system and effective systems of communication with the day time service.
34. Children and young people who are the subject of assessments and interventions are seen, including, where appropriate, alone. However inspectors saw a very small number of cases where children and young people had not been seen as part of the assessment and this was inadequate. The quality of initial and core assessments of children and young people is variable, ranging from adequate to good. Some assessments are detailed with good analysis that draws together salient information and identifies risk and protective factors. Assessments for children with disabilities are generally good. However on most assessments, including CAFs there is insufficient recording of children views, wishes and feeling and therefore little evidence that children's views are informing plans. Limited attention is paid in assessments to diversity issues, although inspectors also saw work which took account of a family's cultural background and contributed to good outcomes for children.
35. The need for further support is decided by suitably qualified managers. Management oversight of open cases was evident on most cases seen by inspectors. The frequency of supervision to monitor the progress of plans and the quality of the recording of that supervision is too variable across

the teams. In some cases recording of supervision is detailed, including identification of actions and timescales, with some evidence of reflective practice. However, this was not consistently evident on all case files and supervision records. While most social workers report that they receive regular supervision it was not always to the timescales identified by the council. Social workers report that they are supported well by line managers and senior managers on a day to day basis and managers are readily available to provide support and advice when required.

36. Children and young people at risk of significant harm receive appropriate protection. Child protection planning is adequate and plans seen by inspectors were comprehensive and addressed areas of risk with responsibility for actions identified in most plans. However timescales for actions are not consistently recorded on plans. Intended outcomes are also not always identified making monitoring progress difficult. Review child protection conferences and core groups are generally timely and well attended by partner agencies. Most social workers' reports for child protection conferences are comprehensive and include good analysis of risk. Child protection conference minutes are well recorded and up to date.
37. Parents spoken to by inspectors reported high levels of satisfaction with the help they had received. They stated that staff worked hard to engage with children and young people, including young children, to make sure that their views, wishes and feelings are taken into account. This is not always fully evident in social workers' case recording. Parents also reported that they were well supported to understand the nature and purpose of social work intervention, including their involvement in child protection planning and child protection conferences. Inspectors also saw good examples of patient and assertive work from social workers to engage families who were initially resistant to social work intervention.
38. Children and young people seen as part of this inspection also reported positively on the support received. However there is a very low rate of attendance by children and young people at child protection conferences and core groups. There was no evidence of support from an advocate to assist them if they did attend.

## **Leadership and governance**

### **Adequate**

39. Leadership and governance are adequate. The safeguarding of children and young people is effectively prioritised in Stockton-on-Tees. The Chief Executive and members spoken to during this inspection reinforced the importance of child protection for the council and there is good awareness raising of safeguarding for all new staff as part of their induction.

Children's social care is a high priority for the council and this is reflected in the agreement by local politicians and officers not to reduce the budget in this important area of work. The Lead Member has a good awareness and commitment to safeguarding children.

40. A multi-agency Health and Well Being Board has been operational since 2011 and through these arrangements there is strategic coordination of the work to improve children's lives. A Children and Young People's Plan has provided an overall direction for the improvement work in the borough; however, this is about to expire and a new strategy has not yet been produced. The lack of a strategy for early intervention services is a significant gap in the coordination of these services.
41. There are good relationships between the Chief Executive, the Director of Children's Services, the Local Safeguarding Children Board, councillors and partner agencies. There are regular presentations of child protection work to the various bodies. There is also good scrutiny and challenge across the partnership resulting in demonstrable improvements - for example the enhanced consideration of the impact of adult behaviour on children by housing, probation and hospitals. The Chief Executive attends some LSCB meetings.
42. The LSCB meets its statutory duties and in some areas of its work is highly effective. There are an appropriate range of meetings and sub-groups. The LSCB independent chair coordinates this work well and provides a robust challenge. The LSCB Business Plan is good with a high level of analysis. There is good learning taken from national serious case reviews (SCRs). Issues for the borough are disseminated to the workforce through regular bulletins and lunchtime meetings. Staff interviewed as part of this inspection were able to demonstrate their learning from these activities. However some of the plans for further improvement are insufficiently focused on how new processes would improve outcomes for children and how this should be measured. There is a programme for LSCB members to attend a range of meetings to observe the effectiveness of front line child protection practices.
43. On an operational level, all agencies spoken to as part of this inspection report effective working relationships with children's social care and there is good multi-agency attendance at child protection meetings including strategy meetings, child protection conferences and core groups. However, most children and young people who have been referred to children's social care in recent months, who do not require an immediate child protection response, have experienced delays in having their needs assessed. Inspectors also found the council's own mechanism to evaluate and review these cases was not robust. During the inspection the council increased the number of staff carrying out assessments and improved their managerial oversight to a satisfactory level however it is too early to judge that these issues have been fully resolved.

44. Performance management and evaluation is not wholly effective. Within the council there are good processes to manage performance including the collation of data, a programme of audits and regular management meetings focused on improving services. There are good communications with the LSCB and members. An LSCB sub-group carries out a good range of performance monitoring. This has resulted in some improvements in the work of the partnership, for instance most recently in the consistency of induction programmes for staff across children's services. However the weaknesses within children's social care, such as the timeliness of assessments and the delays following referrals, have not been scrutinised by the council or the LSCB and this is a significant gap in the robustness of these systems.
45. Staff have annual appraisals linked to a highly appreciated training programme with good opportunities for career progression. There is too much inconsistency in the management oversight and quality and frequency of supervision for social workers. However newly qualified social workers receive appropriate mentoring and support. There is a good workload management scheme which ensures that workers receive an equitable and manageable caseload. There has also been good consultation with staff on ways to improve the child protection work and these findings have been reported to the LSCB.
46. There has been effective learning from complaints, serious case reviews, audits and inspection findings. Issues identified through complaints and positive feedback have been fed into the performance management groups. The findings of audits have also been disseminated. There has been an appropriate response to the previous Ofsted inspections although two issues identified at the previous inspection of contact, referral and assessment, in May 2011, in relation to the timeliness of the social work response and inconsistencies in supervision have not been fully addressed.
47. There is no organised approach to seeking and learning from the views of children and young people and there are no opportunities for young people to be involved in the LSCB, the sub-groups or work programme.
48. Workforce planning is highly effective. There is a good approach to supporting staff from the local community through training and as a result children's social care is fully staffed. There are also good links with local universities to ensure the qualification courses meet the needs of the authority.

## Record of main findings

Local authority arrangements for the protection of children	
Overall effectiveness	Adequate
The effectiveness of the help and protection provided to children, young people, families and carers	Adequate
The quality of practice	Adequate
Leadership and governance	Adequate