

Staffordshire County Council

Inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers

and

Review of the effectiveness of the local safeguarding children board¹

Inspection date: 14 January 2014 – 5 February 2014

<p>The overall judgement is good</p> <p>The local authority leads effective services that meet the requirements for good. It is Ofsted's expectation that, as a minimum, all children and young people receive good help, care and protection.</p>		
1. Children who need help and protection		Good
2. Children looked after and achieving permanence		Good
	2.1 Adoption performance	Good
	2.2 Experiences and progress of care leavers	Good
3. Leadership, management and governance		Good

<p>The effectiveness of the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) is good</p> <p>The LSCB coordinates the activity of statutory partners and has mechanisms in place to monitor the effectiveness of local arrangements.</p>		
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¹ Ofsted produces this report under its power to combine reports in accordance with section 152 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. This report includes the report of the inspection of local authority functions carried out under section 136 of the Education and Inspection Act 2006 and the report of the review of the Local Safeguarding Children Board carried out under the Local Safeguarding Children Boards (Review) Regulations 2013.

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Section 1: the local authority

Summary of key findings

This local authority is good because

1. When professionals need advice about how to help children and young people they know how to make a referral and who to contact in Staffordshire's First Response Team (FRT) and Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH). Professionals receive a timely and prompt response to referrals, and the consent of families is obtained when necessary.
2. There is a wide range of early help services available to children and families, provided within local communities in Staffordshire through children's centres and Local Support Teams (LST). Professionals work and communicate well together to support children and their families so that they receive the right level of service and support to help them.
3. Children experience few changes of social workers, so they build trusting and positive relationships with professionals they know and who get to know them. When inspectors spoke to social workers, they had a good understanding of the children they work with and appreciated the importance of listening to children's experiences and views when making decisions that affect their lives.
4. When children need help and protection, professionals take the right action. Managers record the reason for the decisions taken and this is shared with professionals and families, who understand why professionals are involved and know how to complain if they are not happy.
5. Services to children are based on an assessment of their needs, including their need to be kept safe. The quality of analysis in assessments is good and results in plans for children that are clear and realistic and set out the support available for families to help them to make improvements.
6. When there is a change in children's circumstances, or plans for children are not being achieved as agreed, changes to the plans are made so that children continue to receive the right help and are protected.
7. The children in care council is an active group of children and young people who meet regularly and share with senior officers their experiences of what it means to be a looked after child or care leaver in Staffordshire.
8. Senior managers and members in Staffordshire meet regularly with looked after children and care leavers, listen to their views and involve them in discussions, so that services they receive are right and meet their needs.
9. Senior officers and members have increased funding for services to children so that social workers have the right support to help and protect children and support families.

10. Social workers and those involved in court proceedings work well together so that assessments and planning for children are timely and, as a result, delay is avoided and children are kept safe.
11. Where children and young people cannot live with their parents or other family members the local authority works very hard to keep brothers and sisters together.
12. The authority finds the right placements to meet the individual needs of children so that they can build trusting relationships with adults who care for them. This means children can settle in their community, make friends and achieve their aspirations.
13. Children with a disability and their families receive good support in planning ahead, so that children who may need assistance from adult services in the future have plans in place to support this transition.
14. Young people leaving care receive the right support to help them in becoming independent when they are ready. Care leavers told inspectors that they have safe accommodation and have real choices about where they live.
15. Training for staff is effective and means that the high standards of social work practice expected are achieved and maintained. Workers told inspectors that the training and development opportunities in Staffordshire are good, and provide learning which helps them work with children and keep them safe.
16. Inspectors found that senior officers have been successful in leading changes which have significantly improved services for children in Staffordshire. They want to continue to learn and to do things better for children and families in Staffordshire, and welcome external examination and challenge to support them in this.

What does the local authority need to improve?

Priority and immediate action

17. The inspection did not find any areas for priority and immediate action.

Areas for improvement

18. Ensure that independent reviewing officers (IROs) provide consistent and robust challenge to care planning and see children outside their statutory review in line with statutory guidance.
19. The authority should undertake a review of the range of communication needs of all children with a disability to ensure that workers are fully equipped with the right skills to communicate effectively with children.
20. Put in place effective processes for aggregating and analysing information gathered from return home interviews.
21. Ensure that all social work caseloads are manageable and that supervision fully supports reflective practice.
22. Ensure that there are effective tracking and review processes for monitoring adoption plans.
23. Strengthen the assessment process and content of plans so that they all effectively address issues that relate to children's ethnicity and cultural identity.
24. Further improve the proportion of care leavers aged 19 in education, employment or training.
25. Develop the 4US Forum across the county so that care leavers can help to shape provision wherever they might live in Staffordshire.

Information about this inspection

Inspectors have looked closely at the experiences of children and young people who have needed or still need help and/or protection. This also includes children and young people who are looked after and young people who are leaving care and starting their lives as young adults.

Inspectors considered the quality of work and the difference adults make to the lives of children, young people and families. They read case files, watched how professional staff work with families and each other and discussed the effectiveness of help and care given to children and young people. Wherever possible, they talked to children, young people and their families. In addition the inspectors have tried to understand what the local authority knows about how well it is performing, how well it is doing and what difference it is making for the people who it is trying to help, protect and look after.

The inspection of the local authority was carried out under section 136 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

The review of the Local Safeguarding Children Board was carried out under section 15A of the Children Act 2004.

Ofsted produces this report of the inspection of local authority functions and the review of the local safeguarding children board under its power to combine reports in accordance with section 152 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

The inspection team consisted of nine of Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) from Ofsted.

The inspection team

Lead inspector: Mary Candlin

Team inspectors: Brenda McLaughlin, Tracey Metcalfe, Peter McEntee, Judith Nelson Robert Pyner, Christine Williams, Susan Myers, Dominic Porter- Moore

Information about this local authority area²

Children living in this area

- Approximately 171,000 children and young people under the age of 18 years live in Staffordshire. This is 20% of the total population in the area.
- Approximately 15% of the local authority's children are living in poverty.
- The proportion of children entitled to free school meals:
 - in primary schools is 13% (the national average is 18%)
 - in secondary schools is 10% (the national average is 15%)
- Children and young people from minority ethnic groups account for 8% of all children living in the area, compared with 16% in the country as a whole.
- The largest minority ethnic groups of children and young people in the area are Asian British 4% and mixed 3%.
- The proportion of children and young people with English as an additional language:
 - in primary schools is 5% (the national average is 18%).
 - in secondary schools is 3% (the national average is 14%).

Child protection in this area

- At 31 March 2013, 4,903 children had been identified through assessment as being formally in need of a specialist children's service. This is a reduction from 6,224 at 31 March 2012.
- At 31 March 2013, 535 children and young people were the subject of a child protection plan. This is an increase from 411 at 31 March 2012.
- At 31 March, 2013, 13 children lived in a privately arranged fostering placement. This is a reduction from 15 at 31 March 2012.

Children looked after in this area

- At 31 March 2013, 955 children are being looked after by the LA (a rate of 56 per 10,000 children). This is an increase from 885 (52 per 10,000 children) at 31 March 2012.
 - Of the 835 children living in provision inspected by Ofsted, 202 (or 24%) live outside the local authority area
 - 88 live in residential children's homes, of whom 31% live out of the authority area

² The local authority was given the opportunity to review this section of the report and has updated it with local unvalidated data where this was available.

- 10 live in residential special schools³, all of whom live out of the authority area
- 679 live with foster families, of whom 24% live out of the authority area

The data below refer to the performance as of 31 March 2013:

- 60 children live with parents or other persons with parental responsibility
 - 30 children are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
- In the last 12 months:
- there have been 45 adoptions
 - 30 children became subject of special guardianship orders and ceased to be looked after
 - 275 children have ceased to be looked after, of whom 8% subsequently returned to be looked after
 - 70 children and young people have ceased to be looked after and moved on to independent living
 - 53 care leavers have ceased to be looked after and are now living in houses of multiple occupation.

Other Ofsted inspections

- The local authority operates five children's homes. All were judged to be good or outstanding in their most recent Ofsted inspection.
- The previous inspection of Staffordshire's safeguarding arrangements for the protection of children was in November 2012. The local authority was judged to be adequate.
- The previous inspection of Staffordshire's services for looked after children was in July 2009. The local authority was judged to be adequate.
- The previous inspection of Staffordshire's fostering services was in January 2013. The overall effectiveness for the fostering service was judged to be outstanding.
- The previous inspection of Staffordshire's adoption services was in January 2011. The overall quality for the adoption service was judged to be good.

Other information about this area

- The Director of People and Deputy Chief Executive is responsible for both adult and children's social care and has been in post since November 2010.

³ These are residential special schools that look after children for fewer than 295 days.

The interim head of Families First, which includes all the children's services functions, has been in post since January 2013.

- The chair of the LSCB has been in post since January 2012.
- In 2009, Staffordshire County Council established a 'social work practice' provider (as part of a national pilot project). Currently 154 looked after children and care leavers aged 13 to 25 receive their social work support from this independent social work practice (SWP), of whom 72 are looked after children and 82 are care leavers.

Inspection judgements about the local authority

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection are good

26. Children and their families receive early help from a wide range of effective services in the community, which prevent problems escalating. This is reflected in the significant decrease in children requiring specialist social care services. Staffordshire's Thresholds Framework provides parents with information on how to access help and provides comprehensive guidance to professionals.
27. The local authority's Families First initiative has promoted the development of early help and front door services. Children's centre services and Local Support Teams (LSTs) have been brought together to give children and their families access to good quality multi-disciplinary support, ranging from low-level advice to wrap-around services to address children's more complex needs. This investment in early help has enabled more children to be helped without the need for support from statutory support services. When a coordinated multi-agency approach is needed, an early help assessment is undertaken using the Common Assessment Framework (CAF). While this provides for timely intervention from the Local Support Teams, use of the CAF by partner agencies is under developed and this leads to an over reliance on local authority based services.
28. Good multi-agency information sharing across the partnership identifies children in need of help and protection, particularly through the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH). This forms part of Staffordshire's First Response Team (FRT), which provides a single point of entry to children's social care and delivers a prompt offer of help or assessment. Referrals are screened by qualified social workers in the FRT. Parental consent is obtained where necessary. Partners told inspectors that they value the FRT, which provides signposting to relevant services and guidance on how to refer a child for more specialised support. The co-location of the Emergency Duty Team within FRT provides for a seamless transition between day-time and out-of-hours services, and facilitates effective information sharing.
29. Staffordshire has recently introduced a single assessment process, which facilitates a flexible but robust approach to identifying children's needs and has contributed to the timeliness of assessments and to families not having to repeat their information. The vast majority of assessments demonstrate good analysis of children's needs and circumstances, which supports sound decision making and planning. Chronologies are used routinely and most are of good quality, detailing significant events in the child's life and helping to tell the child's story. Children's needs arising from their ethnicity and culture were well addressed in some, but not in most, assessments.
30. Plans correctly focus on improving outcomes and reducing risks for children. Social workers form positive, professional relationships with the children and

their families. Social workers spoken to were able to articulate the importance of understanding the child's experiences and views. Most case files showed purposeful and sensitive direct work with children, and there were strong examples of recording which told the child's story very well.

31. There are clear arrangements in place to step down a case from statutory services to a team around the child (TAC), which ensures families are able to maintain improvements with less intensive support. In cases involving risk of significant harm, Local Support Teams refer promptly to Specialist Safeguarding Units (SSUs), where swift action is taken to protect children.
32. Child protection enquiries are timely and always led by experienced and qualified social workers. The police provide written information, but do not attend all strategy meetings. Local authority staff work diligently to compensate for this shortfall, and decision making is sound as a result. Investigations involving children with a disability are always co-worked with a specialist social worker from the disabled children's team ensuring children's individuality and needs arising from their disability are fully understood.
33. Information sharing between agencies is effective. Multi-agency partnerships are strong. Agencies work hard together to address domestic abuse and, where this is happening, children are visited promptly and are offered good quality help and support, which reduces risk for the children and adults involved. Adult mental health and substance misuse professionals are key partners, and their contributions to risk assessments are well evidenced in case files.
34. Initial and review child protection conferences are timely. Social work reports routinely analyse risk and identify protective factors, and partners contribute effectively to the sharing of information at conferences. This enables sound decision making and planning. The number of children with multi-agency child protection plans has increased over the last eighteen months and the rate is now similar to that of statistical neighbours. There has been a significant improvement in the voice of the child being heard at child protection conferences. Inspectors viewed some good examples of reports, of the recently internally developed and externally commissioned tools, such as 'My journey, My voice' and 'View Point' had been well used to help children and young people make their views known. However, very few young people attend child protection conferences, which can mean opportunities are missed for their voice to be heard directly.
35. Core groups are regular, with good engagement by agency partners. Parents are also supported to participate, with their views recorded in minutes. Core group activity is effective in monitoring and progressing child protection plans. Most parents spoken to by inspectors understand the reason for the local authority intervention in their lives. Statutory visits are regular, with children seen and seen alone where necessary. Records of visits are detailed and often of good quality, although some would benefit from a clearer focus on monitoring the objectives of the child protection plan.

36. Overall, child protection plans address identified need and reduce risk. Inspectors found good examples of children's wishes and feelings being sought, and timely reviews being held which support effective intervention.
37. In nearly all cases, there is good evidence of authoritative action being taken when concerns escalate or when progress is not being made in children's timescales. All files contain evidence of purposeful management oversight, and where outcomes for children are not improving there is good use of legal gateway meetings, chaired by senior managers, to progress cases through legal proceedings. Senior managers challenge plans when necessary and this helps ensure that permanence is considered at the earliest opportunity. The local authority effectively uses the Public Law Outline (PLO), and there is good evidence that when cases do progress to court they do so at the right time for the child.
38. Good quality work is undertaken in relation to domestic abuse and information sharing is very effective. This underpins the work of the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) and helps to identify and reduce the risks that domestic abuse presents to children. Children and their families have access to a wide range of services and this enables victims and their children to receive offers of individual packages of protection and support.
39. There are effective arrangements in place to identify and monitor children who are missing from home, a local authority care placement or full time education. 1,174 children went missing from education in 2012–2013 and the success rate of tracing children over the last 3 years is almost 100%. Of the 61 children not in full time education at the time of the inspection, all are monitored and offered suitable education and vocational options.
40. Where children are at risk of child sexual exploitation (CSE), intelligence is gathered and shared effectively amongst agency partners, and with other local authorities who place looked after children in Staffordshire. When children are identified to be at risk they are well protected through robust child protection arrangements and support.
41. Children who go missing from care placements have a return home interview. A robust assessment is completed and looks at the reasons for the missing episode to help identify the young person's support needs. Good examples were seen by inspectors of positive impact, where risk has been significantly reduced and incidents of young people being missing have ceased. However, data and intelligence regarding missing episodes is only recorded manually and this constrains the local authority's ability to aggregate and analyse this data. The arrangements with other local authorities who place children in Staffordshire are good and mean that children placed in Staffordshire who go missing receive the same level of response as Staffordshire children, which is good practice.

42. The Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) arrangements for managing and responding to allegations of abuse is effective. The co-location of the LADO at the MASH has resulted in better levels of communication with other agencies, and there is evidence of an increase in referrals as a result of the LADO being more visible to partners.
43. Procedures to ensure the safety of children living in private fostering arrangements are good. There is a well-developed strategy to raise awareness across agencies and the wider community. Practice is sensitive to children's and families' individual characteristics and differences. Awareness of children's isolation and the impact of separation from parents, and the effect of cultural and language difference, is well-evidenced in case files.

The experiences and progress of children looked after and achieving permanence are good

44. Decisions about children coming into the care of the local authority are being made on a timely basis and are supported by good multi-agency assessments of their needs.
45. Thresholds are applied consistently with an admission to care panel providing an additional level of scrutiny, so that where possible children are supported to remain with their family and in their local community. The work of the panel is underpinned by an 'edge of care' intensive prevention service, which means that only those children who should enter care do so.
46. Legal gateway meetings ensure that scrutiny and decision making in planning for possible legal intervention are robust. The panel routinely explores a range of options in meeting the individual needs of children and young people, including concurrent planning. Application of these processes together with very positive working relationships with CAFCASS and the Judiciary, and robust implementation of the Public Law Outline process, means that the length of care proceedings in Staffordshire has reduced significantly and performance in this area is now good. This has resulted in reduced delay in planning for children and in securing their future.
47. Looked after children in Staffordshire benefit from stability, with many examples seen where young people had lived in the same placement for several years, allowing them to make significant attachments to those who care for them; this helps them to realise their aspirations. Most are helped to have a good understanding of their family history and background and to understand the reasons why they are looked after. Staffordshire's commitment to continuity of care is also demonstrated through the 'Staying Put' policy, which enables young people reaching the age of 18 to remain with their foster care placement. The local authority is committed to building on this practice so that more young people can benefit from the arrangement.

48. Young people in out of county placements, including residential, are living in good provision and receiving services that meet their current needs. They are well supported and benefit from placement stability, with evidence that risks are being managed and examples seen of missing episodes reduced or stopped since placement. Where required, young people out of county can access therapeutic support that meets their assessed needs. Contact with families is promoted and maintained. Young people have regular social work visits and this includes seeing them alone. However, some young people report difficulty in contacting their social worker between visits. Reviews are timely and young people contribute to their review and know their independent reviewing officers, who support them well. Providers spoken to by inspectors said that the local authority is rigorous in ensuring that children are suitably placed and safe and works collaboratively with them to help resolve problems early, avoiding potential disruption.
49. Early planning and case management ensures that permanence is being considered promptly. This is reflected in the improved adoption performance and in the increasing use of long-term fostering placements and special guardianship and residence orders in securing permanence for children. The local authority fostering service was rated outstanding at its last inspection in 2013. The authority has a very successful recruitment programme for foster carers and adopters. Retention of foster carers is also good as a result of them receiving effective support and training. This means children benefit from good placement choice and quality. The local authority operates five children's homes, all of which were judged to be good or outstanding in their most recent Ofsted inspection. Where appropriate, specialist placements are used and resourced. The combination of high quality in-house placements, intelligent use of external placements and robust monitoring processes means that the local authority's commissioning arrangements for looked after children are highly effective.
50. Care plans demonstrate long term planning and decision making, with consideration and promotion of contact with brothers and sisters and family members where necessary, ensuring bonds are kept and enhanced. Children understand what their care plan is. When children and young people return home, there is suitable support to give the best chance of a successful reunification.
51. Educational achievement of children looked after is now near the average for all Staffordshire children, which itself is better than average performance nationally. Most looked after young people attend good schools at a level equal to that of all Staffordshire children, although this remains below the national average. The small number of looked after children not in school have access to suitable alternative education, with good support to assist in re-integration into mainstream schooling. Looked after children in Staffordshire are less likely to be absent or excluded from school than looked after children nationally.

52. The involvement of looked after children in criminal activity is at a low level and considerably below statistical neighbour and England averages. Missing from care processes are robust, with good levels of follow-up by the allocated social worker.
53. Social work records are mostly up to date, with clear records of statutory visits being undertaken, including to those young people placed outside Staffordshire, and evidence of children being seen and seen alone. Social workers demonstrate a good understanding of the child's placement and events in the young person's life.
54. Health assessment processes are in place, with regular annual health assessments of children in care at 86%. This includes young people placed outside the authority. Young people also benefit from support from the link child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) worker based in the CAMHS teams, the youth emotional support service (YESS) and a mental health support service (SUSTAIN). However, there are some blocks to the attainment of all initial health assessments in the required 28 day period. The local authority has plans in place to improve performance and has recently agreed a clear pathway with health partners to address this.
55. The needs of looked after disabled children are met through high quality placements, with good social work support provided by a specialist children with disability team. There are good transition arrangements with adult services, with examples seen of their involvement from the age of 14. Individual workers have a range of skills in relation to communicating effectively with children who are non-verbal. However, there is no strategic approach to ensuring all social workers have the necessary skills to communicate effectively with all disabled children on their caseloads.
56. Looked after children reviews are timely and child-centred. Active monitoring of care plans supports good outcomes. Most young people attend their review meeting or complete a consultation form, which helps capture their experiences and views, which are then considered as part of the review process. Young people are represented well by their social worker, which further supports children's voices being heard when making decisions that affect their lives. Advocacy is discussed and actively considered in looked after children reviews. However, inspectors saw some examples of lack of sufficient challenge by the independent reviewing officers when care plans had been or needed to be changed. The recording of some reviews was also unclear, with actions lacking specific timescales. IRO caseloads are above national guidelines and this affects reviewing officers' ability to meet all young people between children's reviews.
57. Staffordshire Mentoring and Independent Visitors Service is available to all looked after children, and social workers use the services available as necessary to support children and young people.

58. The local authority's 'children in care council' is active and provides the authority with insights into the experiences of what it means to be a looked after child in Staffordshire. These insights have informed service development and led to positive changes in services. This includes some innovative work, for example, the children in care council members have visited young people placed outside Staffordshire, taking back issues to senior management for further action. The authority has achieved recognition for this work by recently winning the 'Hear by Right' gold award for providing vulnerable children with opportunities to help shape their service. The council is complemented by four geographically based young people's forums for looked after children, at which young people are consulted on a variety of issues.
59. Inspectors saw some good examples which take into account children's cultural and identity history, including work around sexual identity and vulnerability. The local authority rightly sets high standards for this area of work and recognises the need to further strengthen this practice within assessments and plans.
60. Young people have an awareness of their rights and entitlements, with those under 16 provided with an information pack detailing these, and a similar pack for 16 plus to be released shortly, with an additional focus on preparation for independence. Complaint processes are effective in ensuring that young people's complaints are heard and dealt with. Young people are made aware of and reminded about the complaints process in consultation forms for looked after children reviews. There is an advocacy service in Staffordshire for young people in care, which is currently working with 36 young people.
61. 154 looked after children and care leavers aged 13 to 25 receive their social work support from an independent social work practice (SWP). These young people benefit from continuity of social worker from age 13 to leaving care and beyond. Inspectors found variations in the quality of service provided to these children and young people, with examples seen of insufficient management oversight. Overall, the quality of service and outcomes is good and on a par with that provided by Staffordshire County Council services to looked after children and care leavers. Safeguarding processes are robust, with effective arrangements in place to manage child protection concerns. The emergency duty system within the SWP contributes to supporting placement stability as workers know the cases, and this supports good communication and intervention. Feedback to the SWP from foster carers highlighted that they valued the duty service.

The graded judgment for adoption performance good

62. Adoption is being considered at an early stage in case planning for children where a return to their family would be unsafe or would not satisfactorily meet their needs. The use of legal gateway meetings means early discussions take

place in all cases about the suitability of adoption and the potential to achieve it.

63. The local authority's good and improving performance in completing legal proceedings, already better than the national average, is making a positive difference in reducing the time for most children between when they come into the care of the local authority and being placed with their adoptive family.
64. Matching children with prospective adopters once court authority is received happens more quickly for children in Staffordshire than the national average and meets the government's threshold on the 2013 Adoption scorecard. Between April and December 2013, 64 children were placed for adoption and 71% of children were placed with their adoptive family within twelve months of the best interest decision. At the time of inspection, 105 children were waiting to be adopted in Staffordshire.
65. Performance indicates a year-on-year increase in the last three years in the number of children being adopted. Between March 2013 and December 2013, 61 adoption orders were granted, which is a 35% increase on the previous year. Family finding is rigorous and proactive and includes the effective use of adoption activity days.
66. The local authority has accelerated adoption for young children and those who came into care more recently, but for a small number of harder to place children (such as older children, brothers and sisters, and children with a disability) the authority has struggled to identify appropriate adoption placements. As a result, a few children have been waiting too long without a permanent home being found for them. The authority has identified this shortfall, and following review has put appropriate plans in place for all these children, including converting some long-term foster placements into adoptive placements. They have also recognised through this process the need to strengthen their tracking and review processes.
67. Children are benefitting from the success of Staffordshire's active and effective recruitment campaign for more adopters. This has resulted in a significant increase in enquiries and led to more applications and approvals. For example, the number of approved adopters has increased by 55, with a further 17 adopters progressing towards completion of their assessments. This improves the number and choice of adopters within the county and has enabled more children to be placed with adopters.
68. Staffordshire adoption service has an effective and streamlined approval process for adopters in place, and the authority is doing well on completing both stages of the approval process within the government's timescale. Adoptive applicants can access preparation groups and move on to their assessment promptly.

69. The quality assurance of assessment and matching arrangements prior to cases being presented to the adoption panel facilitates the efficient running of the panel and reduces delay in considering applications. The quality of assessments and matching documentation presented to the panel is good. The chair and panel members provide robust scrutiny and challenge, and feedback is used to improve practice. The recommendations from the panel on approvals and matches are thoroughly and robustly considered by the agency decision maker, who is a suitably senior officer.
70. When it is not suitable to place children inside Staffordshire, or when a match cannot be identified quickly, the adoption service takes prompt steps to refer their information to the national adoption register and regional consortium. Inspectors saw good evidence of persistent and diligent family finding activity, particularly for brothers and sisters and children with complex health needs or disabilities. The adoption service demonstrates a committed, robust and creative approach to this aspect of their work. This has resulted in some notable success in placing hard to place children, but remains a key priority for the local authority.
71. Staffordshire provides excellent training and development opportunities to all foster carers and adoptive parents. The adoption social workers work effectively with the children's social workers and this means support to families is well coordinated.
72. Post-permanence adoption support is good and contributes to placement stability. It is based on a thorough assessment of need and is available to all adoptive families after an adoption order is made. As a minimum this includes the adoption passport, regular newsletters from the adoption service, continued access to local adopters' support groups and training opportunities.
73. Adopters spoke very positively to inspectors about their experience of Staffordshire adoption processes, including post adoption support, and valued the help and support they had received. A good range of help and advice is available to adopted children, including direct work such as Therapy and SUSTAIN, a specialist CAMHS team who undertake psychological assessments and direct work with children.
74. Birth families have good access to support during the adoption process and after adoption, which includes a 'Post Box' service enabling and coordinating indirect contact and supporting direct contact between adopted children and their families, brothers and sisters and other birth family members.

The graded judgment for the experiences and progress of care leavers is good

75. The Through Care team approach enables young people to be supported throughout their teenage years, including leaving care. This facilitates strong continuity and support for young people at times of transition in their lives

through the development of effective relationships with social workers and personal advisers. As a result, most care leavers are helped to develop into independent and resilient young people.

76. Pathway plans are of a good standard. The current format has been developed following consultation with care leavers and is focused on practical guidance; for example, including the contact numbers and names for relevant services. Care leavers felt plans were an improvement on the previous document and effectively helped them to review choices and opportunities in their lives.
77. The local authority audits pathway plans robustly and accurately, outlining the strengths and areas for further development in order to improve effectiveness. The most recent audit shows that the majority of pathway plans fully met the success criteria set by managers. It also identified as an area for development that some pathway plans lacked clear consideration of emotional well-being and mental health support. Arrangements are in place to improve practice in this regard.
78. Care leavers report that they have safe accommodation and clear choices about where they live, which include supported accommodation and the independent rented sector. The local authority has a focus on developing provision for the 'Staying Put' scheme as a choice for young people and currently there are 24 care leavers accommodated under the project.
79. As a result of effective work by the local authority, the data for the proportion of care leavers aged 19 who are in accommodation that meets their needs shows that the Staffordshire has achieved good outcomes which are above statistical neighbours' and national figures.
80. Care leavers spoken to said that they had access to medical and dental services. However, current care leavers do not have consistent access to their health records. This has been recognised by the local authority and a group of young people has worked with staff to develop a comprehensive health record known as the 'Red Book'. This was launched in the autumn of 2013 for new care leavers.
81. Historically, data on the proportion of care leavers aged 19 in education, employment or training has been below that found in statistical neighbours and nationally. The latest comparative data shows that there has been a strong improvement within the local authority, with outcomes now in line with statistical neighbours, although remaining below the national figure. Local authority data show that the figure for 2013–2014 shows further improvement.
82. These better outcomes are the result of a range of effective projects and schemes. For example, the Foundation to Employment scheme has supported around 160 young people over the last four years. The project involves the development of personal skills in readiness for employment and work placements. Altogether there are about 90 employers enrolled in the project. A

significant number of young people have secured full-time employment at the end of these placements.

83. Apprenticeships are available for care leavers within the local authority, a district council and a large private sector construction company. In September 2013 there were nine apprenticeships in place. Currently, all relevant unaccompanied asylum seeking young people are in education, employment or training.
84. Staff have worked well with individual care leavers to develop their aspirations for higher education. The UNIFY (university for you) project has seen the number of care leavers in higher education rise from seven in 2012 to eighteen last year. The project is coordinated by the virtual school, within which there is a further focus on raising the aspirations of younger looked after children who may potentially benefit from higher education.
85. Case records indicate that care leavers are made aware of their entitlements, and this was confirmed by young people spoken to. The care leavers group – the 4US Forum – located in the Stafford area, is an effective and lively reference group which has supported and developed changes to the provision for young people across a range of issues, including information and guidance, health records and accommodation provision. The group has worked on a published care leavers' charter which incorporates their rights and entitlements, including access to the leaving care bursary. However, although it is a county-wide group, it is based in Stafford and this potentially restricts opportunities for young people who live in other parts of this large county to participate fully in its activities.

Leadership, management and governance are good

86. Inspection outcomes for children's social care services show a journey of steady improvement over several years from a historic position of poor to adequate practice to one where all services are now judged to be good or better. Investment in early help has led to a reduction in children requiring statutory social work support, and statutory services have also become more effective in helping Staffordshire's most vulnerable children. Senior managers and elected members have effectively led this improvement and ensured that areas for development in previous inspections are addressed. They are visible and have a good understanding of the needs of children and young people.
87. The combined roles of the Director of Children's Services (DCS) with the Director of Adult Social Services (DASS) were subject to an independent test of assurance, to ensure roles and responsibilities are discharged effectively and the final report was issued in January 2014. The local authority recently made the decision that the roles of the Lead Member of Children's Services and Lead Member of Adult Services would be separated and are now no longer combined. The Chief Executive effectively holds officers to account and takes an active role in understanding children's experiences, particularly those of care leavers, and uses this to improve services. The Director of Children's Services demonstrates strong leadership, commitment and vision and is supported by an effective management group.
88. Staffordshire knows itself, and its recent self-assessment accurately captures strengths and areas for development and reflects inspection findings. The authority is open to external scrutiny and uses learning well, including learning from inspection, to reflect and drive improvement.
89. There is good communication between the strategic boards and across the partnerships and this provides for a co-ordinated approach, the robust monitoring of progress of key priorities and the efficient utilisation of resources. A key strength of the authority and its partners is the collaborative working relationships, which support good communication across all levels of the workforce and promote effective work with families.
90. Collaboration between Chief Officers, the Leader of the Council, the Independent Chair of the Local Safeguarding Board (LSCB) and the Children's Strategic Partnership is effective in safeguarding children and young people. In an environment where overall resources available to councils are reducing, services to vulnerable children are prioritised and resourced. This has resulted in improved performance in key areas of practice, such as timeliness of assessments and improving numbers of children being adopted.
91. The development of the multi-agency safeguarding hub co-located within the first response service supports good communication across the partnership, and this is a strength. There are clearly understood pathways from universal to specialist services and overall there is evidence of good joint working across

agencies. The exception to this is progress in ensuring effective use of the common assessment framework (CAF), where usage by partner agencies remains low, leading to an over-reliance on referral to local support teams whose workload is now close to or exceeding capacity. The authority recognises this and is refreshing its approach to promoting effective CAF usage by partner agencies.

92. Staffordshire County Council is an ambitious corporate parent, and senior officers and members demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the needs of looked after children and care leavers. The corporate parenting panel listens actively to the voice of young people in care. For example the 'Children's Voice Project' has directly influenced the 'staying put' policy and has trained foster carers to increase their understanding of the needs of looked after children. A recent review of the corporate parenting panel has strengthened the scrutiny role, and is now ensuring a greater focus on outcomes. The Lead Member and recently appointed Chair of the corporate parenting panel is enthusiastic, visible and highly committed to driving up standards. He meets regularly with young people and actively involves them in the work of the panel. This includes children influencing the corporate parenting agenda by their attendance and chairing of meetings.
93. The local authority uses information from the joint strategic needs assessment to inform the delivery of services across areas, and involves communities in agreeing priorities and meeting need. Staffordshire's approach to commissioning is based on a thorough analysis of need, and resources are shared across the partnership at county and local level. Commissioning objectives are clearly understood across the partnership and this results in services being targeted and resourced effectively, avoids duplication, and results in children and families getting the right help at the right time. The involvement of the voluntary sector also enhances local support to vulnerable families. This helps to address problems at an early stage and reduces the risk of issues escalating and requiring statutory intervention.
94. Performance management and quality assurance arrangements are effective. Senior and middle managers routinely use the local authority's service performance and quality assurance framework across a range of meetings to monitor performance and the impact of services at operational level. For example, the performance assessment and review meetings provide analysis and monitoring of progress against agreed priorities, and act as an alert to gaps or dips in performance which are then analysed and addressed. Management oversight of practice is evident in nearly all cases and includes scrutiny of case work by operational and strategic leads, who also chair legal and accommodation panels.
95. Overall vacancy levels are low and services benefit from a stable and permanent workforce; agency workers are mainly used to cover planned temporary absence. The authority's retention rate for newly qualified social workers (NQSWS) is 93%, which is notable. In addition, all staff spoken to by

inspectors spoke very positively of the training and development opportunities. They consider Staffordshire is a good place to work and value the support provided by their managers, including senior managers.

96. Since the last child protection inspection, the local authority has increased resources to front line services and has reduced overall caseloads in line with the authority's targets. However, the benefit of increased resources has been reduced in some teams because of increased demands on front line services. This has stretched capacity in some services and resulted in some workers carrying high caseloads and working excessive hours in order to continue to provide a good service to children. Senior managers have a good understanding of workforce pressures and expressed a firm commitment to increase capacity should current levels of demand be sustained.
97. Supervision is regular and the quality of supervision records is satisfactory overall. Managers understand the principles of reflective supervision but struggle to deliver this because of workload pressures. The authority has a detailed understanding of its workforce profile and their training needs and works closely with the LSCB to deliver a comprehensive training programme. Inspectors saw good evidence of practitioners applying their learning in their risk analysis when completing assessments and in direct work with children. Newly Qualified Social Worker (NQSW) and other post-qualifying training is effective.
98. There are effective strategic links between Staffordshire's children services, Cafcass, the courts and the family justice board. Compliance with public law outline processes means that, in the majority of cases, assessments (including expert assessments) are completed prior to the application to the court, and this reduces the need for lengthy proceedings and has improved timescales in permanency planning for children.
99. The local authority has in place a Social Work Practice (SWP), and contract compliance arrangements are rigorous and effective. The relationship between the SWP and the authority provides for collaborative working across services and means that looked after children and care leavers' needs within the SWP remain a priority. However, the authority has identified capacity issues in the SWP provision, in particular around the supervisory arrangements of workers. The authority has provided additional support to the SWP to help address this shortfall and continues to actively monitor performance in this area.

What the inspection judgements mean: the local authority

An **outstanding** local authority leads highly effective services that contribute to significantly improved outcomes for children and young people who need help and protection and care. Their progress exceeds expectations and is sustained over time.

A **good** local authority leads effective services that help, protect and care for children and young people and those who are looked after and care leavers have their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

In a local authority that **requires improvement**, there are no widespread or serious failures that create or leave children being harmed or at risk of harm. The welfare of looked after children is safeguarded and promoted. Minimum requirements are in place, however, the authority is not yet delivering good protection, help and care for children, young people and families.

A local authority that is **inadequate** is providing services where there are widespread or serious failures that create or leave children being harmed or at risk of harm or result in children looked after or care leavers not having their welfare safeguarded and promoted.

Section 2: The effectiveness of the Local Safeguarding Children Board

The effectiveness of the LSCB is good

Priority and immediate action

100. The inspection did not find any areas for priority and immediate action.

Areas for improvement

101. Monitor the police contribution to strategy meetings, section 47 enquiries and child protection conferences to ensure effective partnership working in these areas.
102. Monitor the implementation of the revised common assessment framework and hold all partner agencies to account in supporting delivery of this component of the early help offer.

Key strengths and weaknesses of the LSCB

103. Governance arrangements of Staffordshire Safeguarding Children Board (SSCB) are strong, effective and compliant with statutory responsibilities. The Board is well-constituted, with members at the correct level of seniority to enable SSCB to drive forward the comprehensive safeguarding agenda and key priorities detailed in the Annual Report and Business Plan.
104. The Board has benefitted from having an independent chair who is strong and commands respect. Through the Chair, the Board has representation on other strategic boards including the Health and Wellbeing Board and Children's Strategic Partnership. There are also effective links with Stoke's LSCB and with the Adult Safeguarding Board.
105. The Chair has contributed to health contracts issued by the Clinical Commissioning Group, ensuring that children's safeguarding is a priority. The Chief Executive shows ownership of the SSCB and a commitment to driving forward key priorities, and has a good understanding of issues relating to the work of the Board and the protection of children across Staffordshire. The Board is well supported by its business manager, development officer and training coordinators. The comprehensive Annual Report provides a detailed account of the Board's activity during 2012–13, and updates on the positive progress that has been made. It is forward looking, identifying refreshed and new priorities for 2013–14. Evidence of progress against priorities was found at both strategic and operational levels during the inspection. Progress is reported in a user-friendly document available for all workers, and those who spoke to inspectors were well informed about the work of the SSCB and the difference it made to their day-to-day work.

106. The SSCB is self-aware and good use is made of self-assessments and regular auditing activity, which inform practice and developments. Where an agency requires support this is provided from the SSCB agencies. For example, a joint S11 tool kit that has been developed with Stoke LSCB and is used to help agencies complete and monitor progress against standards set by the Board in respect of the S11 audits. The Board effectively challenges partners, and this has influenced developing practice such as the safeguarding improvements made by the Youth Offender's Institution in Staffordshire.
107. Whilst the Board has taken action to address concerns about the police's contribution to section 47 enquiries, evidence gathered during the inspection indicated this had re-emerged as an issue. In response to these concerns the SSCB, Local Authority and Staffordshire Police have appropriately reviewed and re-focused their action plan.
108. Police attendance at child protection conferences is 50%. The SSCB Chair is involved in discussions at the highest level with the police and an action plan is in place to address this. Additional police resources have been made available to meet demand, including the need to prioritise attendance at conferences.
109. The Board is aware of the challenges in relation to multi-agency involvement in early help, specifically over completion of the common assessment framework (CAF) documentation by partner agencies. The Board recognises that the pace of progress has been limited and work has commenced to address this: a new CAF is being developed, but this remains a key area for the Board to monitor and challenge.
110. Inspectors found many examples of how the work of SSCB has been instrumental in making a difference to children and delivering against agreed priorities. Practice to support children at risk of child sexual exploitation is good. Information is published for professionals, and also for children, to raise awareness and provide guidance on keeping safe. This has been informed by the views of children and young people, including the powerful messages presented to a SSCB conference from a young person who had been subject to sexual exploitation. There is evidence of positive impact for children as a result of this work, for example an increase in referrals in relation to CSE.
111. Inspectors also saw other examples where the Board has provided appropriate support and challenge in monitoring some key service improvements. These include responses to children missing from care, development of the MASH and a revised domestic abuse policy and procedure.
112. A comprehensive and up to date range of multi-agency policies and procedures are in place and regularly reviewed. These include clear and well-used guidance on thresholds which has been developed and produced with involvement of partners and informed by findings from case reviews and training.

113. The Board supported and endorsed the implementation of the 'My Journey; My Voice' tool kit in response to identifying that the views of children were not visible in plans. The tool kit has now been rolled out, and there has been a 53% increase in the wishes and feelings of the child being reflected in child protection plans.
114. Training is a strength of SSCB and strong commitment is evident from across the partnership, with a pool of staff able to deliver against the agreed comprehensive training strategy. There are many examples of the training being informed by the voice of the child, staff evaluations, analysis of data and findings from case reviews and file audits. Training is well attended and is also a source of income, which is re-invested to support the work of the Board.
115. The Board has a performance management framework in place and analysis and monitoring is undertaken by a sub-group, with exception reports and a user-friendly dash board presented to the Board. Audits and case reviews, including serious case reviews (SCRs), are undertaken in line with statutory guidance and inform service improvement. In the past twelve months there has been one serious incident notification to Ofsted, in October 2013, and the Board has agreed that the case will be reviewed using a root cause analysis framework to inform learning. The SCR sub-group monitors the findings and progress against action plans. Many examples are evident of the impact of case reviews having shaped and informed practice developments, training and procedures.

What the inspection judgments mean: the LSCB

An **outstanding** LSCB is highly influential in improving the care and protection of children. Their evaluation of performance is exceptional and helps the local authority and its partners to understand the difference that services make and where they need to improve. The LSCB creates and fosters an effective learning culture.

An LSCB that is **good** coordinates the activity of statutory partners and monitors the effectiveness of local arrangements. Multi-agency training in the protection and care of children is effective and evaluated regularly for impact. The LSCB provides robust and rigorous evaluation and analysis of local performance that identifies areas for improvement and influences the planning and delivery of high-quality services.

An LSCB **requires improvement** if it does not yet demonstrate the characteristics of good.

An LSCB that is **inadequate** does not demonstrate that it has effective arrangements in place and the required skills to discharge its statutory functions. It does not understand the experiences of children and young people locally and fails to identify where improvements can be made.

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