

Hartlepool Borough Council

Inspection of children's social care services

Inspection dates: 23 July 2018 to 27 July 2018

Lead inspector: Tracey Metcalfe, Her Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness	Good

Since the last inspection, children have received more timely and proportionate help when needs have arisen or risks have increased. Multi-agency arrangements are stronger and highly effective. Children and young people are safer, and their life chances are improving.

Children in care and care leavers receive an outstanding service. They are 'cared for' and 'cared about'. They benefit from stable relationships with trusted adults who are committed to providing long-term stability during childhood and beyond. They are surrounded by a strong support network that is focused on achieving positive outcomes, including for their health, education, employability and relationships.

Senior leaders and managers are relentless in their determination to improve children's life experiences and life chances in the face of poverty, deprivation and adult ill-health. They rigorously influence and coordinate policy and practice across partner agencies in order to improve outcomes for children and their families. They have created a vibrant workforce culture that shares and embraces this commitment. Despite increasing workloads, the quality and impact of practice have been maintained and, in some aspects, improved.

What needs to improve

- The quality of assessments to fully explore the impact of children's experiences and to enable plans to be better targeted.
- The quality of recording of management oversight by frontline managers, how they challenge social work practice to improve and how they monitor progress and improvement.
- The quality and consistency of case audits.
- The way in which independent reviewing officers (IROs) evidence the impact of scrutiny of children's plans.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: Good

1. Early help arrangements in Hartlepool are good. They form part of a whole system of services that are helping to build better lives for children and young people. The early help offer is well defined and has been refreshed recently. Integrated locality teams assess and respond swiftly and thoroughly to children's emerging needs and vulnerabilities. Consequently, children and young people are safer, and their life chances are improving. Increasingly, professionals are identifying children who need support at an earlier stage, before their needs escalate. Positively, the number of early help assessments undertaken by partner agencies is increasing, although not all relevant agencies complete early help assessments. Parental engagement with early help services is monitored, and non-engagement is escalated appropriately if concerns remain. Step-up and step-down arrangements to children's social care are well managed and timely.
2. Effective early help is accessed via locality teams or through the children's hub (CHUB). The CHUB provides a single point of entry to children's social care and a range of other specialist agencies, resources and support. There is an impressive range of agency partners co-located within the CHUB. These partners include specialist nurses, dedicated child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), education, housing, domestic abuse and adult services. This has led to a much-improved screening, triage and referral system. Information-sharing is swift and very effective. There is a strong focus on professional discussion about children and families. This is ensuring timely and appropriate responses at the right level of need. As a result, risk and harm are reducing for many children and young people. Effective procedures and interventions track, monitor and support children who are missing education and when parents elect to home educate their children.
3. Clear communication of decisions informs referrers when thresholds for children's social care are not met. Inspectors were impressed by the quality of information-sharing when child protection concerns are identified. Multi-agency information is immediately available to social workers and managers. This has significantly enhanced the quality of strategy discussions and child protection enquiries. Police attend every strategy discussion. This is an improvement since the last inspection. Management oversight is good, although it is less effective when child protection concerns are unfounded. In those cases, managers do not record well enough the rationale for the decision or any further safeguarding actions needed.
4. Senior managers have responded positively to the increased demand for assessments. They recognise that the timeliness of some children's assessments has deteriorated. They have responded effectively by recruiting additional agency social workers and they are currently creating an additional safeguarding and assessment team. This is over and above the significant

investment in early help and prevention across the partnership. The impact on children is mitigated by team managers, who robustly triage and track assessments. Also, the multi-agency intensive response team (IRT) provides effective interventions while assessments are ongoing. This reflects the partnership commitment to the reduction and prevention of harm. Re-referral rates following interventions have decreased. Recent audits of step-down to early help and re-referrals show that assessments and interventions have been effective.

5. The quality of assessments has improved since the last inspection, particularly regarding the identification of neglect. Child and family history are explored well using an assessment model. This has led to improved identification of risk and need. Social workers spend time with children and young people and get to know them well. They use a variety of creative and bespoke methods to undertake direct work. Social workers articulate very well the impact on children of their experiences. They recognise the impact of poverty and disadvantage, but this is not always captured in recorded analysis. Some assessments seen in the special educational needs and/or disability service were overly focused on the child's disability. Assessments did not focus well enough on the child's social care needs. While inspectors did not find that any child was unsafe, in the small number of assessments seen, children's overall needs were not fully understood. The current assessment template does not enable managers to evidence their rationale when they quality assure assessments. Their challenge and feedback to social workers is not always reflected well in supervision records.
6. Senior managers recognise the need to refresh the local authority's outdated assessment and care plan format. Staff have involved children and their parents to help them to develop a new format that is more engaging and relevant to the children and parents' needs. This demonstrates how the views of children and their families influence service improvement.
7. The strength of multi-agency partnerships is evident across all teams. Partner agencies have a strong presence at most key decision-making points for children. Multi-agency attendance at children's meetings is exceptionally strong. Parent, carer and child engagement are high. Initial and review child protection conferences are timely. Professionals co-write review conference reports with social workers during core group meetings. This reflects the shared ownership of decision-making. When children's circumstances do not improve, there is timely escalation to pre-proceedings. There is a strong emphasis on promoting resilience within families. If appropriate, social workers engage absent fathers. Family group conferences are increasingly being used and this is improving children's support networks.
8. The vulnerable, exploited, missing and trafficked (VEMT) approach continues to deliver a strong partnership response, particularly to vulnerable adolescents. The vulnerable persons group (VPG) is used well to discuss,

monitor and respond to individual children at risk. Social workers swiftly refer children and young people to the VPG when risks are identified. This results in effective responses to keep children safe. Most children who go missing receive a return home interview. The information obtained is used effectively to develop or update individual safety plans. The use of the child sexual exploitation tool has improved since the last inspection. Social workers routinely complete risk assessments. Monthly updates to the VPG are leading to reduced risk, and robust safety planning. However, the tool does not enable a written analysis of the findings. It relies on a numerical grading of risk. This is not helpful and requires the reader to interpret the scaling, which limits the overall analysis and impact of the findings.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: Outstanding

9. Children in care and care leavers receive an exceptional service. When children enter care, they are 'cared for' and 'cared about'. Since the last inspection, increasing attention has been paid to making the right decisions for children and young people, and services are consistently good or better. Much improved risk assessment and effective partnership working are enabling earlier identification of families who are unable to change sufficiently to ensure their child's well-being. Pre-proceedings are used effectively to frontload care applications when necessary. This is securing timely legal permanence for children.
10. When it is not possible for children to return home, the Public Law Outline (PLO) is used very effectively. High-quality social work evidence to court has resulted in most care proceedings concluding in less than 26 weeks. The local judiciary and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) have confidence in the social work expertise and professional judgement of staff. Children benefit from the very timely conclusion of care proceedings and legal permanence. Effective risk assessments are undertaken before children return home to live with parents or connected persons. Senior managers ratify all plans before children return home. Subsequent support plans are of good quality and they are regularly reviewed by managers. This is ensuring that the plan is right for the child and that it is safe for the child to return home.
11. Children benefit from early permanence planning. Planning for children's long-term futures begins early. Children's cases are held within the safeguarding teams until a permanence decision is reached. Senior managers robustly scrutinise early permanence plans. Delays are minimal and when they do occur, it is for good reasons. There is a strong focus on placement within children's own families. Increasingly, family group conferences are used to identify members of the wider family. This is resulting in children living within their extended family where it is safe to do so. A high number of children live in 'connected persons' placements. Assessments of family members are

thorough, timely, appropriately regulated and are well supported. This includes those that progress to special guardianship arrangements.

12. When a plan for permanence is agreed, children's cases transfer to one of two 'through-care' teams. Children and young people benefit from a 'one worker' model in these teams. Both teams are permanently staffed with experienced staff, most of whom have been with the local authority for a long time. Children are benefiting because most keep the same social worker while they are in care and when they become care leavers. Inspectors were impressed by the quality of stable relationships that children and young people have with trusted adults. Social workers know their children and young people very well. Visits take place regularly. Assessment and progress records are completed annually in order to assess the child's experience in care, the progress that they are making, and changes that are needed to the support provided to individual children to improve their well-being. However, while this valuable work is in evidence, it is not always reflected well enough in children's written plans. Inspectors could see how IROs were challenging the quality of some plans. They track and chase progress effectively, but this is not via a formal dispute resolution process. This makes it difficult for senior managers to measure progress and extrapolate learning in order to improve practice.
13. Placement stability is very good. There has been a strong and effective focus on providing children and young people with long-term stability during childhood and beyond. The vast majority of children and young people live in foster care within the town or close by. A very small number of children live in residential homes, all of which have been judged by Ofsted to be good or better. Most children under 16 years have lived in the same placement for more than two and a half years. The number of children placed at a distance is very low. If children and young people need to be placed at a distance, this decision is subject to robust scrutiny by senior managers. High priority is given to visiting these children. Social workers go to great lengths to maintain meaningful contact with children. Great care is taken to ensure that their health and educational needs can be met before placements are made.
14. The retention of foster carers is extremely good. Foster carers are very well trained and supported. Despite some recent workforce changes in the family placements team, a strong focus on family finding and placement matching has been maintained. Family placement social workers are proactive and tenacious. They work effectively with social work teams to identify children early who may need a placement. This is resulting in children being matched with permanent carers quickly. Children and young people are well prepared when a match is identified. The strong and trusting relationships they have with their social workers provide emotional security when it is needed most. This is contributing to children developing a sense of belonging and it promotes placement stability.

15. Adoption is considered in a timely way for children when they are unable to return home. Children are matched and placed with adoptive parents quickly. Adoption recruitment is thorough, and adopters are well trained and supported. Social workers and foster carers work effectively together to support children to understand their plan where appropriate. Life-story work is carried out sensitively and is timely. This is helping children to understand the reason for their separation from their birth parents and to move positively into the future. Hartlepool has recently become part of Adoption Tees Valley (ATV), a regional adoption agency that went live in May 2018. The transfer process was exceptionally well managed, and the needs of Hartlepool children are well considered and responded to. Currently, ATV is receiving early notification forms in a timely way, and well before the plan for the child is decided. The permanence champion for Hartlepool has an established working relationship with social workers in the ATV and partnership working at all levels is effective and child-focused.
16. Children in care and care leavers are well supported to stay safe. Effective procedures are in place when children go missing from care or are at risk of sexual exploitation. Robust risk assessments are undertaken when concerns are identified. The resultant safety plans are good and are regularly reviewed by social workers and managers. Children and young people are safer as a result. Senior managers have a tight grip on managing risks to adolescents. Risk information is scrutinised by the corporate parenting forum and reviewed monthly at the VPG. A strong emphasis is placed on risk prevention across the multi-agency partnership. When concerns are identified, immediate and future safety is prioritised. High importance is given to children's recovery from trauma. There is good access to therapeutic services, including one-to-one direct work. This is available for as long as it is needed by the child.
17. A strong emphasis is placed on promoting placement stability and helping children and young people in care to thrive. There has been significant investment in services and support to enable carers and social workers to provide an excellent service. Dedicated nurses and CAMHS are co-located in the through-care teams. Children in care and care leavers have timely health assessments, health advice and health provision. This includes two play therapists, a clinician and a clinical psychologist. Social workers, foster carers and residential staff have easy access to consultation and advice wherever the child or young person is placed. A strong emphasis is also placed on children's education in order to contribute to placement stability. The virtual school has strengthened relationships between education providers and social care services. This is supporting continuity in school placements and is reducing disruption in children's lives. The appropriateness of school places is carefully considered. Where placements have not been successful, additional support is provided swiftly.
18. The virtual school and the team know their children well. They carry out extensive activity to support children's behaviour, attendance and welfare.

School attendance has significantly improved. Actions to improve some children's academic progress are having more variable impact. Personal education plans (PEPs) are improving and show that pupils' progress is reviewed on a regular basis. However, there is variability in how effectively PEPs are used. Academic outcomes for children in care remain mixed. In keeping with the national average, overall attainment has been historically stronger at primary level than at Key Stage 4. Senior leaders recognise that many children and young people, particularly adolescents, come into care with substantial barriers to overcome. They recognise that the outcomes for all Hartlepool children at Key Stage 4 are weaker than the national average. However, children are making better progress in care than they were previously. There is an unstinting commitment to improve children's outcomes and to maintain strategies such as targeted interventions and the particularly successful work to support those young people with complex needs and behaviours.

19. Pathway plans for care leavers are thorough. They are completed with young people and for young people, and reflect high levels of care for their health and well-being. The through-care model is ensuring that care leavers receive support from the same worker throughout their time in care and into adulthood.
20. Care leavers are encouraged to 'stay put' with foster carers and stay close to those who have cared for them and care about them. The strength of the relationships between care leavers and their social workers is making a significant difference to their outcomes. Only one care leaver is not in touch with their worker. The 'one stop shop', which is in the town centre, provides an extensive range of support and resources. There is a significant multi-agency presence, providing young people with emotional and practical support. The high frequency with which young people access this service demonstrates the extent to which they value the support offered.
21. There is a wide range of accommodation available to care leavers. This includes supported lodgings, with floating support and individual tenancies. All accommodation is coordinated by a panel. Great care is taken to match accommodation to the young person's needs and consideration is given to the support needed to make the tenancy a success. This is reducing the number of tenancy breakdowns. Inspectors were particularly impressed with a project that has been set up with a local charity. A disused property has been acquired with the aim of it being renovated by young people for them to live in. Engaging young people in the construction is promoting self-esteem and resilience. The project has the potential to lead to further training and employment, thus enhancing the life chances of the young people. At the time of the inspection, 10 young people had been supported to obtain health and safety qualifications so that they were able to participate in this project.

22. Workers support and encourage care leavers to pursue education and employment, as any good parent would. As a result, the number of care leavers engaged in employment, education and training has increased. There are 23 care leavers currently engaged in apprenticeships. Two care leavers have recently secured full-time employment. Care2work panels are held bi-monthly and progress is scrutinised by the corporate parenting forum. Care leavers have recently celebrated how they have influenced an arrangement for council tax exemption and the launch of their rights and entitlements app.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: Good

23. The leadership of the council is strong, stable and effective. The chief executive officer (CEO) and senior managers are highly experienced and have worked for the local authority for many years in a variety of roles. They have a collective and comprehensive understanding of local need. They understand the challenges in the local area and the impact on children's experiences, health and well-being. The director of children's services (DCS) and the senior team are highly visible and accessible to staff at all levels. They have a clear understanding of the front-line and a detailed knowledge of the quality of social work practice.

24. Strategic planning is much stronger since the last inspection and is well focused on local need and challenges. A combination of adult substance misuse, mental ill-health and domestic abuse results in a high level of demand on children's services. Many children are growing up in an inter-generational cycle of worklessness. Children's social care and the local partnerships have joint priorities to develop resilience in the community and to safeguard children and young people. Senior leaders recognise the need to provide support to tackle problems at an early stage. There is a determination to maximise the chances of children living safely and having happy and fulfilling lives in the community. Consequently, senior leaders are pursuing systems-wide accountability across agencies and professional disciplines. This is beginning to reduce the negative impact on child and family outcomes, the high demand on services and the rising costs. This is a key strategic priority. The DCS has recently restructured the senior management team to provide additional capacity to drive progress.

25. Strong cross-party political support for children's social care services has been maintained. Children's social care services continue to be prioritised, despite the challenge to resources. This evidences the political commitment to improve children's outcomes. Resources are targeted where they are needed most. This is informed by constant interrogation of data and performance information, and by seeking the views of children, young people and families.

26. Strategic partnerships are very strong. There is an abundance of evidence of professionals from other agencies working effectively together with social workers. They work across the whole system of support for children and young people. This has resulted, for example, in more children and young people accessing early help. There has been a reduction in re-referrals to children's social care, and much earlier identification of neglect, risk and need. The outcomes and life chances for many children are improving.
27. The local authority is a good corporate parent. The strong focus on responding to challenges in the community is reducing the need for some children to come into care. It is also resulting in other children coming into care in a timelier way. The corporate parenting forum keeps a strong grip on overseeing outcomes for children and young people. Placement stability and quality are good, but senior managers recognise that this is only one factor in improving outcomes. There is a strong emphasis on health and education. There has been investment in therapeutic responses to support children's recovery and to help them move into the future. Of note is the focus on promoting relationships with trusted adults. The 'one worker' model is resulting in children and young people having the opportunity to build rapport and trust with a social worker who will support them throughout their journey through care. Many children and young people have had the same social worker for more than three years, some for much longer. Children and young people are listened to, and their wishes and feelings are heard. Their experiences shape and influence practice and service improvements. The corporate parenting forum, together with bi-monthly performance clinics, scrutinise children and young people's progress and outcomes to ensure that improvements continue.
28. Performance management is much improved. The CEO holds quarterly challenge meetings with the DCS and the leadership team. Minutes demonstrate that senior managers are being held to account for the quality of services. Data quality is good. Performance is managed through a variety of mechanisms. These include monthly management reports, bi-monthly performance clinics, real-time performance dashboards available to all managers, and practice weeks. Children and young people are consulted during practice weeks about the quality of their experiences and the services that they receive. Senior managers value the views of children and young people and use this, and other information, to ensure that they continue to be a learning organisation.
29. The self-evaluation is accurate. Senior managers know what they are doing well. They reflect constructively and transparently on what they can do better. A strengthened quality assurance framework now provides a clear structure to explore and analyse the quality of practice. There are regular cycles of multi-agency and in-house case auditing. However, senior managers recognise that the oversight of case work and the quality of audit activity are not yet consistently good. Currently, there is no moderation process to check

and measure audit quality. Some audits seen by inspectors did not focus well enough on the impact of children's experiences or interrogate the quality of children's plans or management oversight. This means that children's plans are not as focused as they could be. Audits seen during the inspection did not identify where IROs were not consistently recording timescales for actions and do not use a formal dispute resolution process.

30. Inspectors were impressed with the culture in which audit activity takes place. Managers use audit practice weeks in a constructive way. Children and young people are invited to contribute to these activities. Findings are then discussed with social workers from the child's perspective, how the child's circumstances can improve and how social work practice can be better. This approach supports strengths-based working and is contributing to staff retention. Learning from complaints is used to interrogate service quality. This learning is translated into improvement and action plans. These are appropriately monitored and reviewed by senior managers.
31. Social workers and managers have good access to training and development opportunities. Senior managers recognise that the provision of high-quality social work services relies on a well-trained, supported and motivated workforce. There is increasing investment to future-proof the service and to ensure sufficient capacity in the organisation. They have recruited agency staff and are creating an additional team to manage demand. Individual caseloads are reviewed at every performance clinic. Assistant team manager posts have been created to increase the supervisor to social worker ratio. Additional posts have been created for newly qualified social workers, and five social work students are about to graduate. Retention payments are being made to existing social workers. An enhanced recruitment offer is available for those who wish to work in Hartlepool.
32. The local authority invests very well in the health and well-being of staff. Staff are actively encouraged by managers to take breaks during the day, and they are encouraged to 'refuel' their brains. Each social work team has had a dedicated team development day in the past eight months, focusing on their well-being and resilience. Because of this care for staff, turnover and vacancy rates are low. Staff sickness levels are decreasing. Staff across the organisation told inspectors that they were proud to work in Hartlepool and that they felt valued, respected and safe.



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