

# Gateshead Borough Council

## Inspection of children's social care services

**Inspection dates: 29 April 2019 to 3 May 2019**

**Lead inspector: Jan Edwards**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**

| <b>Judgement</b>   | <b>Grade</b> |
|--|--------------|
| 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        | Good         |
| Overall effectiveness  | Good         |

Children and families in Gateshead receive a good-quality service. There is good practice within most areas of the service, which has a demonstrably positive impact on improving children and family's circumstances. There are well-established multi-agency partnerships. Thresholds are well understood and applied, ensuring that families receive the right help in a timely way. There is a resolute focus on the child, which is threaded through all levels of the service. As a result, the local authority is a committed and effective 'corporate parent and grandparent' that enables children and young people to be at the heart of decisions and service development.

Following the last inspection in 2015, when the local authority was judged good overall, the service experienced almost two years of instability, with four changes of Director of Children's Services (DCS), and loss of staff in the broader workforce. This, combined with funding pressures and decisions to make cuts in some back-office services, resulted in a deterioration in the quality of some service provision. The new DCS, in post for 18 months, focused initially on creating firm foundations from which to make the necessary improvements. There is now a strong and effective senior leadership team that

has delivered tangible improvements to both the quality and impact of social work practice, and the experiences and progress of children is now good. Subsequently, senior leaders have systematically tackled shortfalls in practice in relation to performance management and practice standards, and strengthened service provision in relation to early help, children in need and domestic abuse services. There is a renewed focus on quality, resulting in improved experiences for most children. However, some of the changes that leaders have introduced are still relatively new and, because of this, it is too soon to see an impact.

## **What needs to improve**

- Managers' and independent reviewing officers' challenge to the quality of social work practice, including more effective use of supervision when practice falls short.
- The quality and focus of written plans to ensure that they are specific and targeted to meet the needs of individual children, to include pathway plans that are co-produced with young people to address all risks, and life-story work to help all children in care understand their histories.
- The pace of change in relation to, and the quality of services for, disabled children.
- Access to services for those children in care who live out of the borough, including the timely return of personal education plans from schools outside of the borough.

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

1. Early help arrangements in Gateshead are a strength. There is a coherent multi-agency strategy which underpins the delivery of these services. Children and families are benefiting from a broad range of targeted family support delivered by well-trained, skilled staff. Partners are well engaged in the delivery of the early help offer, completing a high number of early help assessments. Pathways into targeted early intervention are clear and the threshold is appropriately applied. Higher risk cases are escalated swiftly to children's social care or are stepped down when risks are reduced. Early help workers stay involved with their families when cases step up to statutory services. This means that children and families are benefiting from consistent support from a worker with whom they have established effective relationships. The service is making a positive difference to families and is reducing the number of children needing statutory help and support.
2. The local authority has recently restructured its front door, supporting an effective response to referrals. Professionals appropriately contact the integrated referral team (IRT) when they are concerned that a child needs help or protection. The co-location of the police, early help and health 0–19 service, with the addition of other partners through virtual arrangements, supports effective screening, triage and referral systems. Manager oversight and decisions are clear and identify what information social workers need to collate to enable the most appropriate decisions to be made. This facilitates social workers to identify the right level of service matched to need and risk. The team completes proportionate assessments where required, providing a swift and analytical understanding of children's needs to ensure that they get the right help.
3. The daily screening of all police notifications, including domestic abuse concerns, is effective and means that children receive an appropriate and timely response, with the swift identification of services. However, the daily meeting also considers low-level concerns which do not meet the threshold for a social care service. As a result, the local authority is spending a disproportionate amount of time supporting the police to screen out these low-level contacts.
4. Children in need, and those in need of protection, are quickly allocated to the newly formed assessment and intervention teams. Where children are at risk of significant harm, the response is swift and effective. Strategy meetings include key agencies and identify immediate protective actions. The resultant child protection enquiries are thorough, providing a good understanding of risks to children. Joint investigations are not always undertaken with social care and the police even when potential crimes have been committed, and the rationale for these decisions is not always clearly recorded. This can cause unnecessary distress and delay for some children who are asked to repeat their stories.

5. The protocol for unborn babies is effective and is ensuring good oversight, support and risk identification. This means that vulnerable babies and families are receiving timely support.
6. The response to domestic abuse has been strengthened through the merging of children's and adults' resources to form a domestic abuse team that is dedicated to supporting the whole family. This is providing a consistent response to domestic abuse across early help and statutory services. Information-sharing is strong, assessments identify risk and work is effective and child-centred and is delivered by highly experienced and skilled staff. This includes developing a bespoke package of intervention for children and victims. The local authority manages the gap in perpetrator programme provision through spot purchasing and the very recent commissioning of a probation worker to deliver a more individualised response.
7. The quality and impact of social work practice is good. Children and young people are seen regularly by their social workers, who know their children well. Social workers spend time understanding children's lived experiences to provide the most effective support to improve their circumstances. Children and their families benefit from bespoke support from the dedicated family support team. Staff are well trained in delivering a broad range of interventions, including parenting programmes and work to build self-esteem, to improve home conditions and to support children returning home from care.
8. Most assessments are timely, thorough and analytical, leading to effective and timely planning and intervention. Child protection conferences, core group meetings and child protection reviews are well attended and are effective in ensuring that risks posed to children are fully understood and reduced so that children can remain safely within their families wherever possible. Written children in need and protection plans are not specific enough about individual children's needs, focusing on adults rather than what needs to improve for children.
9. Managers provide clear guidance and direction at different stages of the work. Supervision is regular but is not always being effectively used to improve the quality of social work practice, for example when plans are not good enough, or there is not a consistent focus on what is making a difference to children's circumstances.
10. Senior managers are responsive to local needs and changing demands when developing their support offer for children with more complex vulnerabilities. For example, the edge of care and wrap-around service provides a highly effective, timely response where there is a risk that children may need to come into care. The team also supports families when they are at their most vulnerable, on evenings and at weekends. Since its inception 15 months ago, there has been a demonstrable impact in reducing the numbers of teenagers who have come into

care and in supporting children and young people to live safely with their family. Staff are very experienced, skilled and passionate about their work, providing intensive child-led interventions that are making a real difference to improving children's experience and progress. Feedback from parents and children demonstrates the positive impact that the service has had on preventing family breakdown and on supporting children to return home from care. The team is working diligently to understand the contextual safeguarding risks, including working with young people to understand the impact of knife crime.

11. Social workers in the disabled children's team talk knowledgably about their children and families, and there is effective multi-agency support to meet their needs. However, social work practice in this service is underdeveloped. Assessments are not always up to date to reflect children's current and complex needs and case recording does not consistently reflect the level of work undertaken. For a small number of children, the focus on their disability means that wider safeguarding concerns are not always clearly understood. Senior managers know what needs to improve and have put in firm foundations by moving the service into children's social care and new management arrangements to address these deficits, but it is too early to demonstrate the impact on children.
12. When children's circumstances do not improve, there is mostly timely and appropriate initiation of pre-proceedings through the public law outline (PLO). Inspectors identified a very small number of children where this should have been swifter to prevent them remaining in harmful situations for too long. Letter before proceedings planning is effective and tightly monitored and is reviewed by senior managers.
13. The vast majority of children who go missing from home or care receive a good service. At the time of this inspection, the local authority was not offering return home interviews to all children who go missing. This means that the local authority's understanding at the earliest opportunity of why children are going missing is limited. Furthermore, senior managers recognise that the quality and the focus of return home interviews needed to be strengthened. As a result of inspection, the local authority responded swiftly to enhance their response so that all children are offered an interview and to ensure that return home interviews thoroughly explore all factors which contribute to children going missing. Information-sharing within the missing, slavery, exploited and trafficked (MSET) meeting is effective and is used intelligently to inform individual and strategic disruption activity.
14. Other vulnerable children receive a good level of support. Homeless 16- and 17-year-olds receive a child-focused service to ensure that their needs are met effectively. A dedicated officer for the homeless, located in the front door services, provides added value in supporting children to stay at home, ensuring timely access to emergency accommodation, and ensuring children get the right level of support. However, there is little evidence that homeless 16- and 17-

year-olds are informed of their rights to come into care and of the long-term benefits this can bring. This was swiftly addressed by managers, who amended the procedure to ensure that all young people's rights and entitlements are clearly discussed, understood and recorded.

15. Allegations against professionals and related risks to children are robustly managed, although the performance framework requires development to underpin effective tracking and monitoring of allegations and concerns.
16. An increasing number of Gateshead children are home educated. There are robust processes in place for tracking and monitoring the welfare of these children and for those missing education.

### **The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers is: Good**

17. When children come into care, decision-making is timely, ensuring that most children live in safe, stable, permanent and good quality-homes if they cannot live with their families. Most children in care are making good progress. For a small number of children, in particular where assessments and plans are overly adult focused, the decisions for them to come into care are not timely enough.
18. Assessments are mostly timely, comprehensive and increasingly analytical, and lead to appropriately focused help that is well informed by children's views. Experienced social workers are trained well in carrying out specialist assessments that inform court care plans, reducing delay and providing continuity for parents. Social workers have a good understanding of the needs of their children through regularly updated assessments and reviews. Children's reviews are well attended and consider the progress of the child, with particular attention given to children's achievements. Children attend their meetings where it is appropriate to do so, or contribute their views.
19. Greater scrutiny is needed by Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) and managers to ensure consistent quality of plans for children in care. Children's written plans do not reflect the work that is being done to improve their lived experiences. The plans are overly generic and lack focus and timescales for monitoring progress. However, it is evident that focused interventions are making a difference.
20. Children benefit from well-planned and supported contact with family members, which is supporting placement stability. Where it is appropriate, children in care live with their brothers and sisters, and with extended family or carers, who provide them with emotional warmth and stability. Children who return home to live with their parents do so following a safe assessment and are well supported. Decisions are appropriately ratified at statutory reviews and signed off by the

agency decision-maker.

21. Children benefit from the help and support they receive from highly skilled, committed and knowledgeable staff. Social workers know children well, are aspirational for them, and care deeply about helping and protecting them from harm. Children are visited regularly and are seen alone, with most being able to build trusting and enduring relationships with the same worker. Inspectors found examples of sensitive and skilled direct work, for instance helping adopted children to understand their experience through comprehensive life-story work. However, not all children in care are consistently helped to understand their life histories through the provision of good-quality life-story work.
22. Children told inspectors that if they were worried they would speak to their foster carer or their social workers. They spoke positively about the opportunities they have had since being in care, for instance having access to lots of exciting activities, being able to go on holiday and feeling safer.
23. When children are placed out of area, it is usually within close distance in neighbouring authorities. Children are well supported in these placements, although some children told inspectors that they are not able to access benefits, such as leisure passes, that children living in Gateshead have access to. The local authority is working proactively to improve the sufficiency of foster homes, and accommodation available for adolescents and care leavers. For example, a new six-bedded children's home is planned to be able to receive children who are currently living out of the borough by the end of the summer.
24. Permanence planning and stability for children in care are good. Long-term plans for the majority of children are considered in a timely way by the second statutory review. Family finding for children who cannot live safely with their birth parents is considered at an early stage and progress is routinely tracked by senior managers. Parallel planning, for those children unable to live safely with their parents, is progressed quickly. Judges and the Child and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) spoke positively about social work practice in Gateshead. However, while timeliness under the PLO is improving, they raised some issues about delay in completing assessments of connected carers in a small number of cases.
25. When it is recognised that a child could benefit from adoption, this is progressed swiftly for most children. In the last year, timely matching and stability of placements has resulted in early permanence for children, where there was little prospect for a successful return to parental care. The local authority has recently become part of regional adoption agency arrangements through Adopt North East. It is too early to evaluate whether this will widen the pool of potential adopters, particularly for older children and brothers and sisters together.
26. Assessment and preparation of foster carers is comprehensive and effective. This ensures that suitably skilled families with appropriate motivation can meet

the complex needs of the children and young people in their care. The training package for foster carers was updated as a result of this inspection to ensure that carers have the knowledge and skills to identify, for example, issues such as criminal exploitation. There is otherwise a strong offer complemented by good support from supervising social workers.

27. The emotional health needs of some children in care are not being adequately met by the provision of a child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS). The provision of consultation to social workers and carers is highly valued and is helping to support placements and an understanding of children's complex and multi-faceted needs. A recent pilot of forensic CAMHS (F-CAMHS) is providing accessible and timely consultation to the edge of care team for children with complex mental health needs. However, there remain gaps in the timely provision of assessment and direct support to children from CAMHS. This continues to be robustly challenged by the DCS and by the local authority overview and scrutiny committee.
28. Following challenge from the local authority and the virtual school, the overall level of school exclusion is now decreasing over time, and earlier intervention is now reducing the number of days that children in care miss due to exclusion. Personal education plans (PEPs) are smart and reflect the views of the child and their carer's. However, the proportion of PEPs returned to the local authority within expected timescales from out of borough schools lag behind that of in-borough schools. This is limiting the monitoring by the local authority of the educational progress of these children in care. The virtual school has introduced tighter systems to track the out-of-borough PEPs, which has started to show an improvement in the timeliness of their return. The quality of provision to support children in care into further education, employment or training has improved. There are good work experience opportunities and good opportunities for foster carers and children to meet employers and further education providers. The proportion of children in care aged 16 and 17 who do not secure a place in further education, employment or training is now low, and is an improving picture for those aged 19 to 21 years.
29. There has been some significant positive improvement in the care leavers service since the Ofsted focused visit in March 2018. This includes the development of a specialist team, with additional staffing and a new manager. Highly skilled and experienced social workers and personal advisers (PAs) work diligently to advocate on behalf of care leavers to ensure that they receive the support they need early in preparation for independence. A high proportion of care leavers remain in contact with the service. There is a good range of supported accommodation alongside the increased take-up of young people choosing to remain with their foster carers after they reach the age of 18. Good education, work and health support is additionally provided to ensure that young people achieve well. While they have recently improved, not enough written plans are prepared with young people's input, and they lack sufficient focus on risk and measures of progress.



30. The work of the children in care council, One Voice, is effective and influences strategic decision-making and the development of services. The service recognises that the reach of One Voice needs to be extended to engage more children and young people in the children in care council. Children told inspectors about their excellent work regionally. One Voice is working hard, together with other children in care, and is supported by committed staff to improve access to the support they require, for example to improve timely support from CAMHS for children who experience emotional difficulties or where there are mental health concerns.

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

31. The director of children's services, the chief executive and the lead portfolio holder have ensured that children and the work of children's services are corporate priorities. Collectively, they have addressed the deterioration in performance that occurred during the period of interim leadership and have ensured that children remain at the heart of the service. Strong political support has secured a protection of the budget and additional investment. This has increased children's home sufficiency, enabled the restructuring of how the service is delivered, increased the workforce capacity of the care leavers and IRO service, strengthened commissioning arrangements, and supported the development, recruitment and retention of social workers and the wider workforce. Since the focused visit last year, the local authority has restructured the care leavers service, increasing personal adviser capacity and introducing a dedicated manager, who is now in post.
32. There is mature and well-embedded governance by which the DCS is held to account. Scrutiny provides high challenge. The DCS and her leadership team lead by example, and have high expectations. Since the DCS came into post 18 months ago, she quickly identified the key weaknesses in the quality of some areas of service provision and the improvements required to get to good. Robust and effective action has secured the improvements needed to sustain good-quality services and, within the context of change, has further improved services. For example, children who are in need of early help and those who are on the edge of care are now receiving an excellent service that is making a tangible and positive difference for children.
33. The whole council's 'Thrive' agenda has given an aligned focus to meeting the needs of those most vulnerable and those 'just coping'. As a result, early help has been reconfigured to target multi-disciplinary resources to the most vulnerable, enabling increased direct intervention and intensive family support. This has meant that early help services are increasingly able to support families on a continuum of need and are preventing children and families from escalating

to needing the help of statutory services.

34. Senior leaders recognised that the disabled children's service was not good enough and that the pace of change to improve outcomes for children in the disabled children's service had been too slow. As a result, authoritative action was taken to return the service from the special educational needs and disability service to the management of children's social care in January 2019. Appropriate plans are in place across the whole service to further improve the quality of practice, management supervision and IRO challenge to maximise outcomes for children.
35. The local authority knows itself well and has a well-informed self-evaluation that is updated appropriately. Performance management information has improved significantly under the direction of the DCS. There has been a steady and safe reduction of numbers of children in care and of those subject to child protection plans, with sustained good stability of placements and improved performance across most performance indicators.
36. There has been considerable development of quality assurance processes, which had deteriorated prior to the arrival of the DCS at the end of 2017. Systems to track and drive the progression of work, such as monitoring how quickly children achieve permanence, or the use of pre-proceedings processes under the PLO, are effective. At the time of this inspection, auditing practice, although improved, was not consistently leading to evaluations of the quality of practice. Senior leaders revised and trialled a new audit tool during the inspection to ensure greater focus on securing evaluation about quality and impact of practice.
37. There is a stable and skilled workforce that is enthusiastic about working in Gateshead. The local authority is increasingly effective at recruiting and retaining staff, including through the Step Up to Social Work and Frontline programmes. Social work practice in Gateshead is flourishing. Leaders and managers have created a culture in which social workers are valued and feel valued. Staff are positive about the support, guidance and training they receive and the visibility of senior managers.
38. While management oversight of social work practice has improved, supervision is not being used consistently to improve quality and focus on what is making a difference to children. There are effective mechanisms for supporting social workers through co-allocation and close monitoring when caseloads increase. This means that social workers develop positive enabling relationships with children and their families. Inspectors saw evidence of effective and creative direct work with children, which had ensured that the child's changing wishes and feelings were considered.
39. The DCS and chief executive have developed a strong culture of learning. This is demonstrated in the approach to introducing new models of practice, the

development of new services and learning from feedback and peer reviews. Senior managers have been proactive in addressing process issues such as improvements to the audit and return home interview tools, to further support a focus on outcomes for children, and, in a small number of cases, to improve practice.

40. The local authority has developed a bespoke model to underpin its social work practice. This overarching systemic approach is supporting social workers, with a range of tools to develop the effectiveness of their practice with children and families. This means that children and their families are benefiting from a tailored approach to their individual needs.
41. There are well-established and developed strategic partnerships which are supporting effective multi-agency working. Children's services have been effective in helping partners to understand the threshold to services. However, senior leaders have escalated the need for further operational improvements to be made by the police in relation to their triage of contacts that are not for children's social care.
42. Corporate parenting is strong. Senior leaders and politicians are ambitious and committed corporate parents. There is a shared ambition for children and young people, who are encouraged to influence service delivery and development. Both the lead member and the chief executive meet regularly with young people to seek their views. They listen carefully, and, as a result, respond to children's concerns and are proud of children's achievements and the progress they are making. For example, young people have been effective in changing the name of the contact centre and contact time to be known as family time. The chief executive employs care leaver apprentices in the service and the lead member acts as a mentor for a care leaver, with whom he meets every month. One Voice, a sub-group of the Corporate Parenting Partnership, has held senior leaders to account by challenging them annually to make their own individual pledges to children and young people. This has resulted in increasing work experience and apprenticeship opportunities.



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