

Tameside metropolitan borough

Inspection of local authority children's social care services

Inspection dates: 13 May 2019 to 24 May 2019

Lead inspector: Dominic Stevens
Her Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers	Requires improvement to be good
Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement to be good

Since the time of the last inspection in 2016, when services for children in Tameside were judged to be inadequate, progress had been slow. However, more recently, significant changes in senior leadership have supported the adoption of a much strengthened 'whole-council' commitment to improving the quality and impact of services for children. This has not only been the case within the children's services department but also more widely within the local multi-agency safeguarding arrangements and political leadership. As a result, there has been a notable increase in the pace and effectiveness of service development. Leaders have an improved understanding of how well services are working for children and of their key priorities.

Some important improvements have been made. For example, the scale and effectiveness of early help services have been strengthened through a new locality-based model that is now serving most children well. A new multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) is ensuring that referrals about children for whom there

are safeguarding concerns are almost always dealt with quickly and appropriately, while an 'edge of care' team works intensively with families to ensure that children only come into care when they need to. However, much progress, particularly in services for children in care, is very new and so impact is inevitably limited. The local authority is not providing the consistently good services for children that it aspires to.

The roll-out of a preferred model of social work practice is helping to strengthen how children's views are sought. However, children's views are not consistently used to inform either the analysis in assessments or subsequent actions.

Efforts to recruit and retain sufficient social workers and an increase in overall staffing levels to better match need mean that most social workers now have manageable caseloads. However, a few still have caseloads that are too high. This has an impact on how often they visit children and on how effectively children's plans are implemented.

The frequency and regularity of management oversight and supervision has improved but is not consistently effective in ensuring the progression of support to children and families. This is compounded by a lack of sufficient challenge and oversight by the chairs of child protection conferences and independent reviewing officers (IROs).

What needs to improve

- Timeliness of achieving permanence for children in care.
- The challenge provided by senior leaders, team managers, IROs and conference chairs about the pace and quality of social work and placements for children in care.
- How consistently children's wishes and feelings are used to inform assessments and plans.
- Children's experience of being able to develop a relationship with a consistent social worker who visits them regularly and makes sure their plans are progressed.

The experiences and progress of children who need help and protection: Requires improvement to be good

1. Although still developing, locality-based early help services are providing interventions that are improving children's welfare. An early help 'hub' deals with requests for support for children and their families in a timely manner. Investment in early help teams has had a positive impact. Experienced and capable staff come from a broad range of professional backgrounds. They

engage well with children and their families, visiting regularly and doing some effective direct work to seek their views. Liaison with other agencies, such as schools and health services, is increasingly well coordinated. Area-based early help panels successfully provide a forum for professionals from a range of agencies to have thorough discussions which lead to plans for coordinated intervention to effect change for children and their families. The needs of children receiving early help services are, in some cases, complex and chronic, and the situations of a very few of these children require a statutory intervention.

2. When children are referred to the MASH because there are concerns about their safety or welfare, decisions about thresholds for intervention and next steps are timely and are almost always well matched to presenting need and risk. Sufficient necessary information to inform decision-making is sought quickly and used well to inform thinking about next steps.
3. When children's cases are passed between the early help hub and the MASH, recording of contact with families and information-sharing is not always as thorough as it should be. This means that decision-making, for example when there are further contacts in relation to the same child, cannot always be based on full information. On occasion, this necessitates duplication of discussions with children, their families and other professionals. Although improving, the quality of referrals from partner agencies is not yet consistent and initial requests for a service are not always appropriate to children's risks and needs.
4. The emergency duty service deals effectively with matters of immediate safety and provides a 24-hour social work qualified service that is further bolstered during the evenings and weekends by staff from the edge of care service. However, with only one social worker on shift at any one time, and no contingency in place for additional social work staffing, responses to children cannot always be as timely as they could, or should, be.
5. When children are at risk of significant harm, strategy discussions, attended by statutory representatives from police, health and other relevant agencies, are held swiftly, and appropriate decisions are made. Distribution of minutes from these meetings is sometimes delayed and this limits the local authority's ability to ensure that agreed actions are completed in a timely or consistent manner.
6. Once referrals about children have been assessed by the MASH, those that require a statutory response are passed to the local authority's duty teams within 24 hours, or faster, if necessary. Children's cases are swiftly allocated to social workers by managers in these teams. They provide clear initial management direction, and children are almost always seen quickly by their social workers. When children are at immediate risk, action is timely and appropriate.

7. Beyond this point, visits with children, assessments of children's needs, and planning are not always progressed at the pace they should be. Some children wait too long for their initial child protection conferences to be held, and assessments are not always completed at a speed that matches children's needs and circumstances. Most social workers have manageable caseloads but, for a minority, caseloads are too high. This has an impact on their ability to consistently visit all children with sufficient frequency.
8. For a large majority of children in need of help and protection, social work assessment and intervention with them and their families is making a positive difference to their welfare. In recent months, this has been more consistently the case. For example, both analysis and the extent to which children's wishes and feelings are included and considered are better in more recently completed assessments. Reducing social worker caseloads, a very recent reduction in staff turnover and the early impact of the rolling-out of a strengths-based and outcome-focused model of social work practice are helping to drive this progress.
9. Social workers are mostly seeking children's wishes and feelings, but the use of direct work techniques is not fully embedded in all teams' practice. Children's ethnicity, religion, culture and other factors central to their identity are rarely well considered. Direct work with children, supporting a child-centred and relationship-based approach to practice, is strongest in teams with specific functions, such as the child sexual exploitation and edge of care teams. In these teams, direct work is used better to support the local authority's interventions with children and their families.
10. Meetings to review child in need and child protection plans are generally attended by a range of relevant agencies, but these meetings are not always used well to monitor and drive forward progress on children's plans. There is only limited challenge by the chairs of child protection conferences. Plans themselves, while containing appropriate actions, lack specificity. They are not always clear about the outcome desired or timescales for their completion and some plans are overly focused on adult need. This means that actions to address risk and improve children's welfare are not always as effective as they could be.
11. Pre-proceedings work to try to achieve positive change for children and to avoid the need for them to come into care is not consistently timely. The local authority is taking steps to improve this. A specialist court officer post has recently been appointed to strengthen how progress is tracked. Assessments are of an improving standard and are more frequently supported by relevant specialist assessments. However, for some children, when improvements in their care are not achieved, the local authority takes too long to make applications to court to secure their welfare. Letters to parents before court action lack sufficient clarity about what is expected of them.

12. When children are at risk of sexual exploitation or are at risk as a result of going missing, intervention to address these risks is established and effective within duty and safeguarding teams. Social workers engage well with police colleagues to assess risk and to take decisive action. Social workers in the child sexual exploitation team build trusting relationships with children and help them and their parents to protect them. When children have been missing, most are offered and swiftly receive return home interviews. These are used to inform future planning to reduce the likelihood of them going missing again. The response to children at risk of criminal exploitation is not as embedded or as strong as the response for children at risk of sexual exploitation and the risks associated with going missing. However, key risks and vulnerabilities for individual children are recognised and appropriate action is being taken to reduce these risks.
13. Support for disabled children is not always of good quality or progressed quickly enough. Staff vacancies and turnover have contributed to higher caseloads and a lack of consistency in work with children. Education, health and care plans (EHCPs) are not sufficiently aligned with child in need, child protection or care plans. This means that planning for children can be unclear or confusing and that professionals and families are not able to fully deliver against the actions to improve children's welfare. Although social workers and their managers do recognise when disabled children are at risk of significant harm, they do not always engage partner agencies well in these investigations. This limits the range of relevant information on which decisions and interventions are based and limits their effectiveness.
14. Management supervision and oversight is regular and provides guidance at key points in work with children. This is a significant improvement from the time of the last inspection. However, direction to social workers is not always clear, the completion of agreed actions is not consistently tracked, and there is little record of reflection or analysis. This means that supervision, although improving in frequency and quality, is not always supporting the progression of plans for children.
15. There are effective mechanisms in place for tracking children who are home educated or are missing education. The local authority has experienced some success in reintegrating home-educated children back into schools, when this is in their best interests, and liaises closely with schools when children have been missing education for more than 10 days.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: Requires improvement to be good

16. Improvements to the quality and impact of services for children in care have been more recent and so have had less impact than improvements achieved in the services for children in need of help and protection. The local authority is

now seeking to tackle this. Over the last six months, decisions to bring children into care have been mostly timely and have been appropriately matched to their needs. However, some children continue to experience delay in being matched with permanent carers. A strong edge of care service works well with children, young people and their families to provide intensive and flexible support. This is helping to ensuring that children who can be safely looked after within a family environment are, and that children are not coming into care unnecessarily.

17. This improvement is reflected in the reduction in the number of children coming into care in an emergency or unplanned manner. Pre-birth assessments are thorough, helping to ensure that when babies need to come into care, this is achieved with the minimum delay for them.
18. Reductions in social workers' caseloads mean that most children now receive regular visits from their social workers. Social workers see children alone and seek to obtain their wishes and feelings. However, this is not consistently supported by the use of direct work tools, nor always used well to inform assessment and planning.
19. Despite an increase in the number of social workers, staff turnover means that many children still experience several changes of social worker, and this limits their ability to build relationships of trust with their workers. Half of the children in care in Tameside have experienced three or more changes of social worker in the last year. Some children and young people who spoke to inspectors talked about their experience of changing workers, and how this has affected their ability to make trusting relationships. One young person said that she was aware that her social worker had lots of children to see and that this meant she was rushed when visiting her. She said this made her feel that she was not always listened to.
20. Life-story work is rarely undertaken with children in long-term foster care. Children usually participate in their looked after review meetings. Advocacy, while available, is underused as a means of engaging a broader range of children in decisions about planning for their lives.
21. When children in care have specific areas of vulnerability or risk, help and support is appropriate to their needs, but not always of a consistently high standard. For example, interventions to provide support to children involved in offending behaviour or who are suffering from mental ill-health are thorough. Close-working with the youth offending service helps provide positive support to children who have become involved in offending behaviour, while social workers generally make good use of learning from strengths and difficulties questionnaires (SDQs) and the advice of a dedicated clinical psychologist in order to inform their work with children. Social workers involve the healthy young minds service to provide helpful support to children. However, when children or young people are at risk of sexual exploitation or because they go

missing, this is not as strongly addressed as it is by the local authority's duty and safeguarding teams. This is because joint-working with the child sexual exploitation team and the use of learning from return home interviews are not as consistent in the children in care team.

22. Appointments to assess children's ongoing health needs, for example annual health reviews or dental checks, are now timely for the large majority of children. Initial health assessments, though, take too long for about half of all children who come into care.
23. Many children in care are supported by their foster carers and social workers to engage in hobbies and interests. This is positive, but is rarely supported by actions in their care plans or records of review meetings. Records of meetings contain too little sense of childhood and in many cases lack aspiration for children's futures.
24. Children in care in Tameside do not always receive support that is well targeted to their individual educational needs. Consequently, their progress and attainment are not consistently strong. At key stage 2, children are making good progress in reading, writing and maths, and their attainment is above the national average for children in care. However, at key stages 1 and 4 children and young people are achieving below the national average. Children's ability to do the best they can in school is held back by high levels of fixed-term exclusions. The rate of persistent absence from schools, although significantly reduced over the last year, remains above the national average. Headteachers speak highly of the increasing role of the virtual school in strengthening support for children in care's education. Almost all children under 16 years now have regularly updated personal education plans (PEPs). However, these plans are not as effective as they could be, as they do not consistently include children's views or focused targets that better support children's educational progress. Post-16 support is currently underdeveloped. While the number of 16- to 18-year-old children in employment, education or training is broadly in line with the rate in similar local authorities, it had dropped over the last year, and many measures to tackle this, such as the establishment of a virtual college, are still at the planning stage.
25. Children's need to keep in touch with people who are important to them, such as family, friends or former carers, is usually well considered. Children who use the contact centre to meet with family members describe a poor service, however. Children in care told inspectors that the rooms are not suitable for older children and that, when several contacts are taking place at the same time, conversations can be heard between rooms and that sometimes this can be upsetting.
26. For many children, planning to ensure that they live in permanent homes that match their needs does not take place in as timely or as effective a manner as it should. Children's assessments are not updated regularly and, consequently,

care plans are not always reflective of their current needs. Changes of social worker and IRO and a lack of sufficient urgency or challenge by either managers or IROs mean that planning lacks pace and focus for many children. Recent use of permanence and legal tracker documents are now helping the actions in plans to be tracked and progressed more efficiently for some children. Decisions to match children in more stable longer-term foster placements with permanent carers and actions to follow through on decisions are too slow. Special guardianship orders (SGOs) have been underused as a long-term option for children. Although plans are in place to address this, and some recent action has been taken, this is too new to have had an impact on improving the use of SGOs.

27. Most children are living with experienced carers who are meeting their needs and are improving their outcomes, including those placed out of area. Brothers and sisters are placed together unless assessments indicate they would benefit from being placed apart, in which case separate placements are identified. However, for too many children, weaker care planning means that matching is not well considered. This is beginning to improve, but some children are still living with the emotional impact of past, sometimes multiple, placement moves.
28. Until very recently, support, training and development for foster carers were key weaknesses in Tameside. This was recognised by senior leaders and the capacity and management oversight have recently been improved. Foster carers report feeling better supported, but important requirements for improvement, such as foster carer agreements and training opportunities to increase the individual skills and knowledge of foster carers, are not yet in place.
29. Once children are identified as being likely to benefit from adoption, social work input to achieve this and to match them with suitable carers is strong. There is a widening pool of adopters, who receive effective support, not only during the approval process but also as children start to live with them. Post-adoption support for children is also strong, with good use being made of the adoption support fund to identify packages of support that are well tailored to children's individual needs. Child permanence reports and life-story work are of a good standard. Although Tameside has previously been behind national expectations for the timeliness of adoption, children are now being placed much more quickly.
30. A determined focus on improving the quality of work with care leavers has had a significant impact. Although many young people who have left care over the last few years may still be experiencing the legacy of less positive care experiences, the support on offer to them now and to those young people currently leaving care is much better matched to their needs, is more responsive and, consequently, more effective.

31. Young people participate in the development of their pathway plans. Their views are well incorporated into plans, which clearly identify needs and necessary actions to address them. They not only have access to a broad range of supportive services such as mental health counselling, relationship counselling and substance abuse services, but also to positive opportunities such as driving lessons or participation in the successful care leavers' football team. Care leavers are mostly living in appropriate housing, and plans are in place to extend the available options further. Care leavers told inspectors that that they are currently allocated personal assistants too late, mostly after their 16th birthdays. They say that this means that things can happen too quickly when moving to independence. Not all care leavers understand how to access their health records, and staff do not routinely check that they know how to, or that they have done so.
32. Support for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children is effective. When children and young people arrive in the UK, the local authority provides suitable accommodation, and support is progressed well. Practice with these children and young people shows good cultural competence, not only in finding suitable placements, but also in their wider support.
33. The children in care council (CICC) is a vibrant and energetic group, and the members are very positive about the activities they are increasingly involved in and the support that they receive from each other. The local authority has, in the last few months, shown a renewed focus on engaging with and listening to the CICC, for example through their important involvement in shaping the newly launched care leavers offer and in the appointment interviews for senior staff. There is more to do to increase the membership and diversity of the CICC and further develop the impact it is beginning to have on shaping services.

The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families: Requires improvement to be good

34. Most children in Tameside continue to receive services that require further improvement to be good as a result of slow progress in tackling key areas for development identified at the time of the last inspection in 2016. There has been a notable increase in the pace and rigour of service improvement since late 2018. This is positive, but many of the actions taken, and plans agreed, are relatively new and so their impact is limited. Too many children continue to experience multiple changes of social worker and IRO.
35. The appointment of a new senior leadership team has brought a new focus and energy to improving the quality and impact of services for children in Tameside. There has been a significant increase in investment, for example in two temporary social work teams and an edge of care team, and renewed political drive to improving support for care leavers. This demonstrates a

whole-council commitment to driving improvement for children and their families.

36. Partner agencies have been successfully engaged by the local authority to help improve joint working at both the frontline and strategic levels. Better communication and coordination have underpinned the strengthening of early help services, and the introduction of the new MASH, and have significantly improved attendance by statutory partners from police and health at child protection strategy discussions. The local authority has made good use of the improvement board to involve partner agencies in achieving this progress. New multi-agency safeguarding arrangements, replacing the former local safeguarding children board, have been in place since the start of the year. These arrangements are clear and provide a helpful framework for oversight and challenge with partners regarding practice with children and families. At this early stage of implementation, evidence of impact is limited.
37. A focused approach to recruitment and retention and a commitment to increasing staffing capacity has meant that there has been a steady rise in the number of social workers who are permanently employed by Tameside. There has also been a reduction in staff turnover. This means that caseloads, although still too high for a few social workers, have reduced. This enhances social workers' ability to visit children more regularly and to reduce previous drift in progressing their plans.
38. The local authority's developing approach to ensuring that its staff have the right knowledge and skills is well considered. Based around a strengths-based and outcome-focused model of social work, it includes the local authority's 'heart of practice' document and a set of practice standards that, taken together, set out a clear and consistent approach to working with children and their families. The local authority has also focused on providing training and development opportunities, for example through access to online research and 'best-practice' guidance and with targeted training. This includes working with parents with learning disabilities or with young people who display sexually inappropriate behaviour.
39. The local authority's approach to recruitment, retention and staff development is thorough and energetic. Many initiatives, such as the implementation of a preferred model of social work practice, signing off a new neglect strategy and assessment tool or the investment in nationally recognised social work recruitment schemes, are at an early stage. As a result, impact is either partial or not yet evident.
40. Some elements of the local authority's improvements to services have been necessarily focused on the most pressing priorities, such as recruiting more full-time social workers and reducing caseloads or providing training on key practice areas. As a result, some of these improvement measures, which have been implemented quickly, lack either the detail or level of development

necessary to best drive further progress. For example, there is no agreed caseload level for different teams based on quantified need, or a clear process for assessing the impact of training in improving practice.

41. It is as a corporate parent that the local authority's support for children was previously most lacking in pace and aspiration both at the frontline and at a senior level. Services for these children are still not good enough. For example, senior leaders have not maintained sufficient oversight of a small number of children who have been placed in unregistered settings and so could not assure themselves that the quality of care that these children received was meeting expected standards. Systems to track and progress plans for children in care, for example plans for how quickly children achieve permanence or progression of care proceedings, are not as effective as they could be. The local authority is seeking to develop its existing systems further, but there is more to do to deliver improved timeliness and quality for children. Similarly, improvements in the support available to special guardians, increased support to foster carers and new plans to expand the sufficiency of placements are very positive developments but are mostly at too early a stage to have had a significant impact on what is available for children now. Notably, the new assistant director has enhanced oversight of practice with children who have a plan for adoption, and has taken action to ensure that the search for prospective adopters for Tameside children was widened earlier in the process of family finding. This has meant that children are now being placed more quickly with their adoptive families.
42. Consideration of performance information by the corporate parenting board lacks a sufficiently sharp focus on understanding what the data means for children. The regular attendance of a member of the CICC at the corporate parenting board has strengthened the board's focus on considering the wishes and feelings of children in care and care leavers. This has included listening to, and acting on, suggestions made by children and young people, such as in the content of the newly launched care leavers offer.
43. A significant increase in the capacity of services for care leavers and a much keener focus on improving the services they receive and the outcomes they achieve have led to important improvements in this service. In common with other areas of greater progress, these have been supported by a council-wide focus. Support from the lead member has been particularly positive in helping to add energy and priority to this work. The offer for care leavers is impressive, but is very new, and many care leavers and members of staff are either not aware, or not fully aware, of care leavers' entitlements.
44. Strengthened performance and quality management systems are helping senior leaders to have a generally good knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses in frontline practice with children and families. They have made good use of peer and other external review and increasingly successful use of audits to understand the quality and impact of practice. For example, a 'deep dive' audit

of the MASH was recently carried out to help test the effectiveness of the new arrangements and begin to refine them further. These measures, alongside the role of the improvement board, have been central to informing and directing the local authority's improvement activity and increasing the pace of progress in recent months. In some areas of practice, such as adoption and fostering, leaders have only more recently begun to have a clear understanding of frontline practice.

45. The role of IROs and chairs of child protection conferences in monitoring and quality assuring practice remains underdeveloped. The local authority has significantly increased staffing levels in this service to support progress, but this is only very recent. Information about the engagement of children and feedback from them and their families are not consistently used to help understand the impact of practice and to shape service development. Although improving in some areas, for example in listening to and acting on the views of the members of CICC, this is not uniformly the case. For example, information about children's engagement in child protection conferences or themes from complaints or advocacy are not routinely considered.



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