

North Tyneside Council

Inspection of children's social care services

Inspection dates: 9 March 2020 to 13 March 2020

Lead inspector: Nigel Parkes
Her Majesty's Inspector

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

Senior leaders share a relentless commitment to continuous improvement. Outward-looking and open to challenge, they have succeeded in creating a learning environment in which social work is thriving. Strategic partnerships are mature, well developed and highly effective. The quality of performance management information is excellent. The reach of the quality assurance framework is extensive. Using a rich combination of 'facts, figures and findings', senior leaders are proactive in responding to shortfalls in practice and performance. They are daring and imaginative in pushing the boundaries in order to improve the experiences and progress of children in need of help and protection, children in care and care leavers.

Partner agencies have enthusiastically embraced early help. Further changes to the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) have significantly increased its impact and effectiveness. The interface between children's social care and early help has been strengthened. The local authority's preferred method of social work has transformed the way in which they, and their partners, talk with children and

families and to each other about what worries them, what is working well and what they need to do about it. As a result, most children get the right level of help and protection at the right time.

When it is no longer possible for children to live safely at home, the local authority pulls out all the stops to try to make sure that children stay connected with their friends, families and communities. Most children in care live in good-quality placements within a 20-mile radius of their family homes. The local authority is in touch with virtually all of its care leavers, the vast majority of whom are living in safe and suitable accommodation.

What needs to improve

- Supervision and management oversight are not of a consistently high quality or always clearly recorded.
- In the absence of good-quality life-story work, children and young people are not routinely getting the help they need to make sense of their, and their families', histories and better understand why they are in care.

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

1. Early help is making a real difference to children's and families' lives. The sheer volume of early help assessments that partner agencies complete, and their willingness to lead teams around the family (TAFs), reflects the fact that in North Tyneside early help is everybody's business. Partner agencies have wholeheartedly embraced the approach, advocated by the local authority, of talking with families in very simple and easy-to-understand terms about what they are worried about, what is working well and what the next steps should be. This is helping to make sure that children and families get the help and support they need quickly and easily.
2. Early help coordinators, employed by the local authority, respond swiftly when TAFs get stuck or when partners need advice or guidance. This may involve the early help coordinator attending the TAF meeting in person, mobilising the support of other organisations, getting a family partner involved or suggesting that the family needs to be referred to children's social care. This is helping to build confidence and resilience in early help.
3. Children and families who need additional support are really benefiting from the services provided by the four multi-disciplinary early help locality teams. Family partners, North Tyneside's equivalent of family support workers, work extremely well with other agencies and organisations, including the voluntary sector, to deliver targeted packages of help and support. These packages of support are well thought out, well coordinated and impactful. This means that children and

families are able to get the help and support they require without the need for social workers to become involved unnecessarily.

4. The quality of contacts and referrals from partner agencies reflects an awareness of needs and vulnerabilities and a good understanding of the thresholds. This helps to avoid delay. The relatively new professional advice line is being well used.
5. Changes made to the MASH since the focused visit in 2018 have significantly enhanced its impact and effectiveness. Daily triage meetings with the police about all child concern notifications help to ensure a speedy and proportionate response. Requests for statutory advice from children's social care to inform an education, health and care needs assessment are now routinely routed through the MASH. The development of the early help hub has helped to ensure that cases are stepped up and down from early help to children's social care appropriately and easily. As a result, children and families get the right level of help and protection.
6. MASH workers demonstrate an appropriate level of professional curiosity. Their use of a common language and shared scaling system, based on the local authority's preferred social work model, helps to make sure that information is shared effectively. Children's and families' histories are carefully considered. Parental consent is only dispensed with when it is necessary to do so. Robust management oversight ensures that thresholds are applied appropriately. Processing of cases is timely. However, on occasions the rationale for the decision taken is not recorded as clearly as it might be.
7. Children who are identified as being at immediate risk of significant harm are seen immediately. Strategy meetings are held promptly. Child protection investigations are timely and thorough, leading to swift and appropriate action to safeguard and protect children.
8. Good two-way communication between the MASH and the emergency duty team helps to ensure that children and families in need of help and protection receive an appropriate response out of hours.
9. Clearly recorded and well-managed, allegations and concerns about adults in positions of trust who are working with children are dealt with very effectively. This is helping to safeguard and protect children.
10. Social work assessment teams provide a timely and proportionate response to referrals coming through from the MASH. Cases are allocated on arrival and families are contacted promptly. Assessments, which are of a good standard, provide robust analysis and a clear rationale for decisions about whether to proceed to an initial child protection conference. Management oversight is strong. Thresholds are applied appropriately.

11. Social workers use a variety of different tools, often in creative and imaginative ways, to explore children's lived experiences and help parents to understand the impact of their behaviour on their children's lives. This includes the use of words and pictures.
12. Children who are the subject of a child protection plan benefit from danger statements and safety goals that are easy to understand and make clear what needs to change and why. Interim safety plans are clear and explicit, leaving no doubt about what needs to happen to keep children safe while work is progressing. Week-by-week child in need and child protection trajectory plans completed by safe and supported team social workers specify who will do what and by when, while at the same time providing families with a clear route-map to a life free of social work involvement where appropriate.
13. Where concerns continue unabated or risks increase, cases are escalated swiftly and appropriately. Social workers and their managers are making intelligent use of the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline, not simply as a stepping stone into care, but as a vehicle for change. Letters before proceedings are clear and easy to understand. Meetings with parents focus on what needs to change, why and by when. Progress is closely monitored. Currently, there are no children's cases that have been in proceedings for more than 18 weeks. This approach has been a trigger for change that has demonstrably helped to improve the experiences and progress of a number of children.
14. Family network meetings are used to good effect to tap into the strengths of extended family members in order to help build resilience, protect children and promote sustainable change. Core groups, child in need meetings and review child protection conferences take place at regular intervals, are well attended by the relevant professionals and rigorously monitor the progress of children's plans.
15. Social workers are good at engaging statutory and voluntary sector partner agencies and coordinating their efforts to deliver effective packages of support. Time and again, this is having a very positive impact on the experiences and progress of children, including those who are living with domestic violence, parental mental ill-health and/or substance misuse.
16. Planning for the transition to adult services starts early with disabled children and their families. The quality of help and protection, care and support that the children's disability team provides is good. Part of a whole-life disability service, and co-located with whole-life disability health services, the team works hard to try to ensure a smooth transition from children's to adults' services. Transition and enablement workers, working alongside case accountable social workers, provide practical help, advice and support to enable young people to develop the confidence and life skills, including travel skills, that they need to prepare them for adulthood.

17. The local authority and its partners are actively engaged in refreshing their strategic and operational responses to children who go missing from home or care and those at risk of criminal or sexual exploitation. This is part of a shift towards a much sharper focus on extra-familial risk. Since simplifying the missing and return home interview pathway, the offer and completion of return home interviews (RHIs) has increased considerably. However, further work is required to improve the quality of RHIs in order to make better use of the information generated.
18. The local authority is highly effective in identifying and tracking children who are missing from education and those who are being home educated. Parents and professionals are challenged appropriately.
19. The local authority is extremely diligent in making sure that 16- and 17-year olds who present as homeless are offered suitable accommodation and appropriate packages of support, based on a detailed assessment of their needs and circumstances.
20. An extremely impressive level of investment in participation and engagement is empowering children and young people. Children involved in child protection processes benefit from having access to high-quality advocacy and support. The local authority is now taking participation and engagement to another level with disabled children. Although still early days, there is already clear evidence of disabled children's voices having an impact, as evidenced, for example, by the SEND (special educational needs and/or disabilities) youth forum's success in persuading the elected mayor to get the pavement outside one of their short breaks children's homes repaired.

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

21. Inspectors saw no evidence of children being in care who did not need to be. When children are the subject of care proceedings, the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) and the judiciary confirm that most applications are timely and proportionate and that the quality of assessments and care plans is of a generally good standard. Emergency applications are the exception rather than the norm.
22. The local authority works extremely hard to make sure that when it is no longer possible for children to live safely at home, children stay 'connected' with their friends, their families and their communities. This is reflected in the sharp rise in recent years in the number of children who achieve permanence through living with relatives under the terms of a special guardianship order (SGO) and the proportion of foster carers who are connected persons.

23. Although still in its infancy, the local authority's Keeping Families Connected service has already achieved considerable success in helping to safely and appropriately reunite a number of children with their birth families and preventing the need for others to come into care in the first place. Those children who are reunited with their birth families do so in a planned way with input from a clinical psychologist, and only after the risks have been thoroughly assessed and effectively mitigated.
24. Most children benefit from good-quality placements that are meeting their assessed needs. Children are given plenty of opportunities and encouragement to develop their interests and hobbies or express themselves through a range of social and leisure activities. The vast majority of children in care are living within a 20-mile radius of their family homes, most of them with a foster family.
25. Most children are active participants in their reviews, either directly or with the support of an advocate. Trajectory care plans make it easier for children and others to understand what they can expect and who is likely to do what for them and by when. Most reviews are timely and include relevant others. Decisions taken and actions agreed are clearly recorded.
26. While there is increased evidence of the independent reviewing officers' (IROs') footprint on children's case records, the quality of critical challenge provided by IROs is variable. Some IROs are more proactive than others in tracking the progress of children's plans and are quick to use the escalation process when it is appropriate to do so. Others are less rigorous and this has, on occasions, contributed to drift or delay. This is being robustly addressed.
27. Every effort is made to make sure that children are able to safely enjoy family time with those people who matter most to them. By appropriately delegating authority to children's carers, the local authority is also making it possible for children to spend time with brothers, sisters or friends, without always needing their social worker's authorisation. This helps to reduce some of the stigma and sense of difference that can sometimes be associated with being a child in care.
28. The virtual school (VS), which has developed strong and effective relationships with schools, has high expectations for children in care. Although the quality of personal education plans is variable, the VS closely monitors targets and interventions to make sure that they are the right ones, that the action being taken is having a positive impact and that the pupil premium is being used effectively. The attendance and behaviour of all children, including children in care, are regularly monitored. Attendance is in line with national averages. Exclusions are few and far between. As a result, the attainment and progress of children in care at key stages 1 and 2 are in line with, or better than, national averages.
29. The multi-agency raising the health and education of looked after children (RHELAC) team, of which the virtual school is a part, provides a highly effective

one-stop-shop service for children in care, particularly those who are experiencing problems with their mental health and emotional well-being. Where necessary, RHELAC is able to fast-track children in care who need support from children and adolescent mental health services.

30. Short-term placement stability has improved considerably as a direct result of the decisive action taken by senior leaders, and is now in line with statistical neighbours. The new fostering strategy, designed to increase the range of foster placements available, is also starting to have an impact.
31. Social workers and their managers clearly understand the significance and importance of permanence for children in care. However, while the majority of children achieve permanence in a timely way, it is only recently that children living in settled and stable long-term placements who have no realistic prospect of being able to return to their birth families are starting to be formally matched long term with their foster carers.
32. Senior leaders have introduced a new missing performance scorecard and are currently testing a simplified missing and return home interview pathway. Having piloted the Philomena Protocol in their own children's homes, they are now about to roll it out to foster carers. Whereas, previously the offer and completion of RHIs was relatively low, the position has improved quite dramatically in the last quarter.
33. Senior leaders are acutely aware of the fact that more needs to be done to help children to make sense of their own, and their families', histories and develop a better understanding of why they are in care. Life-story work has been identified as a key priority area for development in 2020/21.
34. The Children in Care Council (CiCC) is exceptional. This small group of sparky, challenging, thoughtful and imaginative children and young people has had a significant impact both locally and regionally. They have, for example, been influential in changing the words that people use when talking about children in care and their experiences, improving family time venues, training foster carers and helping professionals to understand what it is like to be in care. The North Tyneside's CiCC has also played a key role in establishing the North East Regional Children in Care Council and, to date, has coordinated three regional conferences for professionals.
35. The recruitment, assessment, selection, supervision of and support for foster carers are well managed. The active involvement of the CiCC and the use of buddies both during the assessment process and after carers have been approved are invaluable in helping prospective carers to better understand their role. All foster carers and connected persons enjoy the same rights to training and support. Staff in the fostering team say that they feel well supported. They speak positively about their work and have manageable caseloads.

36. The regional adoption agency (Adopt North East), which is hosted by the local authority, is delivering positive and timely outcomes for children from North Tyneside whose plan for permanence involves adoption. Prospective adopters are carefully and properly prepared. Prospective adopter reports provide clear and concise assessments of the prospective adopters' parenting capacity and their ability to provide the love, warmth, comfort and security that children need. Adopters who had experienced a particularly distressing and wholly unexpected adoption breakdown during the introductory process could not speak highly enough about the support they received from the adoption service, which has encouraged them to give adoption another go.
37. The adoption panel provides an appropriate level of critical scrutiny and challenge. Post-adoption support is well considered. The agency decision-maker understands the critical importance of her role and what it means for children. The way in which she records her decisions is exemplary.
38. The local authority is in touch with the vast majority of its care leavers, thanks largely to the dogged determination of their personal advisers (PAs). PAs know their young people well and work hard to develop and maintain positive relationships with them. The support they provide is making a real difference to young people's lives. One young person said of her PA that she was 'the only one who gets me'.
39. Pathway plans are developed with care leavers and most are up to date. While the quality of pathway plans is variable, most make it clear who needs to do what and by when to make it possible for the young person to achieve their short-term goals and, in the longer term, to realise their ambitions.
40. The vast majority of care leavers are living in suitable accommodation that is meeting their needs. The range of housing options available to them, which includes supported accommodation as well as training flats provided by the local authority's own Starting Point service, is impressive. Increasing numbers of care leavers are taking advantage of the option to stay put with their former foster carers once they reach 18.
41. Robust and appropriate action is being taken to address the lack of suitable support for care leavers experiencing problems with their mental health and a recent rise in the number of young people who are not in education, employment and training. However, it is too soon to evaluate the impact of this activity.

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

42. Senior leaders, who are outward looking and open to challenge, know themselves and their services extremely well. They are under no illusion that the

local authority's improvement journey is complete. When they see that things are not working, they are quick to do something about it. Even before this inspection started, senior leaders were already working on those areas identified by inspectors as being in need of some further improvement. These include short-term placement stability, permanence for children who are settled in stable long-term foster placements, missing children and those at risk of exploitation, the mental health of care leavers and life-story work.

43. Senior leaders share a common set of values and principles. Their determination to make life healthier, happier, safer and better for children is readily apparent. They take as their starting point the experiences and progress of children and families. Having made a significant investment in participation and engagement, senior leaders get much of their inspiration from what children say and tell them. Children's voices are up front and central in the local authority's transformation programme and are increasingly influential in the design, development and delivery of services.
44. Governance arrangements are extremely robust. Reporting arrangements are clear, simple and effective. High-quality performance management information allied to a genuine commitment to openness and transparency means that elected members are well informed and able to provide an appropriate level of rigorous scrutiny and critical challenge. Totally committed to the principle of keeping children in care 'connected' with their families, their friends and their communities, they have provided additional funding for important new initiatives like the edge of care service and the provision of additional high-quality supported accommodation, including training flats for care leavers.
45. Strategic partnerships, particularly between health, education and the police, are based on open and honest relationships, mutual respect and a strong commitment to reciprocal challenge. Not afraid to have 'proper conversations', senior leaders, both within the local authority and across the partnership, hold themselves and each other to account effectively. Together, they are delivering improved outcomes for children and families.
46. Representatives of Cafcass and the judiciary talk very positively about their working relationships with the local authority and describe senior managers as being open to challenge and actively engaged with the local family justice board.
47. The local authority and its partners are acutely aware of the actual and potential risks of the criminal and sexual exploitation of children and young people. They have well-established, pan-Northumbria missing, slavery, exploitation and trafficking arrangements but are in the process of refreshing them in order to be able to combat the threat posed by county lines. A considerable amount of work is being undertaken as part of the planned move towards a much sharper focus on extra-familial abuse. The new safeguarding partnership arrangements are firmly established.

48. Senior leaders' understanding of demand, supply, capacity and sufficiency is sophisticated, well developed and used effectively to shape and inform strategic planning and commissioning. The accommodation strategy is having a positive impact on the experiences and progress of care leavers. The new fostering strategy, designed to increase the range of foster placement options available, is starting to have a positive impact. Short-term placement stability has improved considerably.
49. The way in which the local authority's preferred method of social work has been rolled out across early help and children's social care, and embraced by partners, has had a transformational impact. It provides a common language with which to talk about and explore issues and concerns, needs and risks, dangers and protective factors in a way that is easy to understand for parents, professionals and partners. Particularly impressive is the way in which the local authority's electronic case recording system has been adapted to ensure that it helps rather than hinders this approach. Equally impressive is the way in which senior leaders are leading by example, using the same simple methodology in reports and policy documents.
50. The local authority is doing what any good corporate parent would and should do to improve the experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers. This is evident not only in its approach to the offer of accommodation, apprenticeships, work experience and health passports for care leavers, but also in its thoughtful approach to the language it uses based on feedback from children in care. The corporate parenting forum has been restructured and is currently going through a period of transition. The lead member is determined to increase its impact and make it more influential. However, in the here and now, the minutes of the corporate parenting panel do not do full justice to the leadership and rigorous scrutiny that the corporate parenting forum is starting to provide.
51. The quality of performance management information, and the way in which it is presented, is excellent. Monthly performance reports contain a wealth of relevant information. They provide a good range of relevant measures, with trend information, clear data analysis and easy-to-understand commentary. Their real strength is in the service-by-service area dashboards, which make it clear what is working well, what the worries are and what needs to happen next. This enables senior leaders to be proactive in responding to emerging issues and addressing actual or potential problems.
52. The local authority's quality assurance framework is clear, explicit and well developed. It starts from the premise that 'safe organisations are honest and open' and asserts that 'while we know that we will never get it right for every child all of the time... we refuse to accept that we cannot do it better next time'. Senior leaders are using a range of good-quality assurance tools, including brief case reviews, themed case reviews, early help learning reviews and peer reviews, to rigorously interrogate practice and performance. They have recently

added collaborative case reviews to their 'tool bag'. Learning from all of this audit activity, and from serious case reviews, is widely disseminated in easy-to-understand, bite-sized chunks, and is used effectively to support continuous improvement.

53. Senior leaders are always willing to explore new ideas, new ways of working and new practice models, and are eager to learn from and capitalise on the experiences of other local authorities. They innovate, but never for the sake of innovation. Their involvement in Partners in Practice and in the Learning Lab reflects their willingness to pool and share their ideas and support others' learning and development, knowing full well that this stimulates the professional development of their own managers and staff.
54. Senior leaders have succeeded in creating an environment which supports and encourages high-quality social work. After a period of relative turbulence last year, and despite fierce competition for social workers in the regional employment market, senior leaders have succeeded in achieving a stable workforce. There are very few vacancies. Staff turnover is low. Currently, the local authority does not employ a single agency social worker.
55. Social workers talk very positively about the level of access to good-quality training and the opportunities available to support their professional development. The latest staff survey shows that social workers enjoy working for North Tyneside Council. Most believe in what they are doing and feel appreciated and valued while they are doing it.
56. Most social workers receive regular good-quality, and increasingly reflective, supervision, although, on occasions, management oversight is not as clearly recorded on children's case records as it could and should be. Regular fortnightly group supervision is well recorded and provides further opportunities for reflection, shared learning and peer support. Direct observation of one such session provided a valuable insight into the dynamic nature of the process, the level of energy generated and the learning the participants gained from it.



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