

Ofsted  
Piccadilly Gate  
Store Street  
Manchester  
M1 2WD

T 0300 123 1231  
**Textphone** 0161 618 8524  
[enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk)  
[www.gov.uk/ofsted](http://www.gov.uk/ofsted)



26 May 2021

Sarah Parker  
Director of Children's Services  
Civic Centre  
Glebe Street  
Stoke-on-Trent  
ST4 1HH

Dear Sarah,

### **Monitoring visit of Stoke-on-Trent children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Stoke-on-Trent children's services on 20 April 2021. The visit was the third monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in March 2019. The inspectors were Andrew Waugh, Her Majesty's Inspector, and Kathryn Grindrod, Her Majesty's Inspector.

The local authority is beginning to make some progress in improving services for its children and young people.

### **Areas covered by the visit**

During the course of this visit, inspectors reviewed the progress of the local authority's improvement plan in respect of children looked after, whether services and the quality of practice have improved and, if so, whether changes to practice are embedded and being sustained.

Inspectors looked at the local authority services that support the needs of children who are looked after and the effectiveness of practice and planning for children in care.

The visit considered a range of evidence, including electronic case records, supervision files and notes, observation of social workers and senior practitioners undertaking assessments and planning for children in care, and other information provided by staff and managers. In addition, we spoke to a range of staff, including senior leaders, managers and social workers.

### **Overview**

The senior leadership team has a growing and more focused understanding of frontline practice. This is informed by a wide range and combination of in-house and independent audits, alongside accurate performance data. A clearer analysis of the deficits and strengths of the service provides leaders with an accurate understanding of the impact of practice and decision-making for children. Despite this, further work

is needed to ensure that in-house audit activity is strengthened to consistently recognise good standards of practice. Since September 2020, progress against the improvement plan has gained in pace but, given the scale and depth of the task, improvements are incremental and there remains a lot to do.

The number of children in care in the authority is at the highest level ever experienced. Analysis of the situation demonstrates that, once children become looked after, too few return home, or there are delays in progressing to alternative permanent living arrangements. Senior leaders are aware of a legacy of poor practice and decision-making that has led to drift and delay for children still in care, and some remain in care for too long. Numbers of children entering care have risen during the past six months and the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic has resulted in children waiting longer for court proceedings to secure permanence arrangements. Senior leaders and managers are working to address delays and discharge children from care where it is safe to do so.

Currently, the workforce remains fragile, with over a quarter of social workers recruited on an agency basis. This means that some children experience too many changes and are unable to build a meaningful relationship with a social worker. Action by senior leaders is starting to improve the capacity and stability of the workforce. Agency staff recruited to the additional posts created following the full inspection are gradually being replaced with permanent social workers. An imaginative recruitment campaign has successfully recruited 55 new social workers, with a range of experience. The new staff will be in post within the next two months.

Social work caseloads are high and, for some social workers, this has a negative impact on their ability to practice effectively and complete good-quality work with children. Senior managers acknowledge the impact this has on practice and have plans to reduce caseloads once staffing levels have stabilised. Despite having high caseloads, social workers report that they are well supported and recognise the progress leaders have made in improving practice and outcomes for children.

### **Findings and evaluation of progress**

The impact of senior leaders has grown and is having a positive impact on day-to-day practice. A range of appropriate quality-assurance processes are now embedded across the service, providing managers with an accurate insight into the performance of their teams. Senior leaders are aware of the remaining deficits in the service and have quickened the pace of progress against the improvement plan.

In an effort to understand why so many children are in care and whether alternative permanent arrangements can be quickly and safely implemented for some children, managers have undertaken an in-depth analysis of cases. A range of panels have been introduced to better support more timely and effective care-planning. In addition, an improved infrastructure assists senior managers to have a clear line of sight on practice. Although these measures demonstrate progress, they have yet to

successfully reduce the overall numbers of children in care by having the right plans at the right time for children.

The local authority is making appropriate decisions for children to become looked after. Most decisions are timely and are made following a comprehensive assessment and action that safeguards children from further harm. Children are safer and living with carers who understand their needs. Nevertheless, some children continue to experience the negative impact of delayed decision-making; for some, this is attributable to historical decision-making but for other children it is more recent.

The quality of assessments of children's needs is improving but remains too variable. The majority of children looked after have up-to-date assessments of their needs. These assessments have been updated contemporaneously for some children, to reflect their changing needs and circumstances. In better-quality assessments, social workers have included family histories and the impact of events on individual children. Social workers evidence their understanding of wider concerns by including the views of other professionals and children's wishes. This leads to an improved analysis of strengths and risks, with recommendations and actions that are focused on children's needs, which informs future planning.

The quality and timeliness of children's care plans are too variable. Those care plans that are more effective include children's views and consider children's needs well, including contingency planning. Clear actions with timescales focus on good outcomes for children. Social workers update plans when children's needs and circumstances change. In some cases, care plans become less effective once care proceedings are concluded and children are seen as safe. These plans lack focus and lead to some children experiencing drift and delay in securing permanence, which is not always challenged effectively by managers or independent reviewing officers.

From a very low base, the voices and experiences of children are increasingly more evident in case-recording and decision-making. Direct work is being completed; this is effective in helping children understand their histories and the plans for their futures. Life-story work has still not begun or is yet to be completed for some children who have been looked after for several years. This means that these children may not understand the reasons why they are in care or why their futures are being planned in a particular way.

Many case audits undertaken by frontline managers are overly focused on social work processes and do not gauge the impact that practice and decision-making has on a child's lived experience. Some frontline managers are overly optimistic in their evaluation of the work they audit and do not fully understand the elements of good practice. This is evidenced by the authority's own moderation process and the resultant downgrading of some judgements. As a result, the records of audit activity do not always maximise potential learning for social workers and team managers as they do not offer an accurate reflection of practice. Further work is required to ensure consistency of approach in the auditing of cases and a timely move towards a common understanding of quality standards.

Social workers speak positively about working in Stoke. They describe having supportive team managers and senior leaders, which is contributing to building confidence in their practice. Supervision is regular and, more recently, is evidencing reflection around children's outcomes. Social workers value the range and quality of training that is available, and feel their learning is improving their practice. Assessed and Supported Year in Employment social workers are positive about the support and development opportunities they are offered. They feel safe in their practice as their skills develop. All these factors are positive and are improving the quality of social work practice with children.

Supervision is held on a regular basis and staff find it helpful and supportive. There is a marked difference in the quality of supervision records from September 2020 onwards. Records have become more detailed, reflective and analytical, focusing on driving the child's plan forward. Strengths as well as risks are clearly identified. The actions from previous supervision are monitored and carried forward where necessary, along with new actions identified and specific timescales. Decision-making is analytical and provides a clear rationale. Children would be able to review their records in the future and understand why decisions were made for them. This is a positive difference with real impact for children. Social workers comment on how much they valued the work completed through a commissioned external evaluation programme. They also say that supervision now provides clearer direction and holds them to account in an effort to improve children's experiences and progress.

Senior leaders, managers and staff in the authority have demonstrated that, since the focused assurance visit in September 2020, the pace of change has quickened and improvements in practice are visible. However, there remains much to do in order to implement and embed the changes required to ensure a service with consistent and lasting good-quality practice.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you and your staff for your positive engagement with this monitoring visit. I am copying this letter to the Department for Education. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

**Andy Waugh**  
**Her Majesty's Inspector**