

Inspection of Newcastle local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 29 November to 10 December 2021

Lead inspector: Louise Hollick, Her Majesty's Inspector

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

Services for children in Newcastle city council are of good quality and have improved since the last inspection in 2017. The Director of Children, Education & Skills and her leadership team have made steady progress to establish an environment where the quality of social work practice is good for the majority of children. This progress has continued despite the challenges of COVID-19, and the local authority had returned to a business-as-usual approach at the time of the inspection. Leaders have active plans in place to improve the management oversight that has led to areas of weaker practice in a minority of teams.

There is strong corporate and political investment and prioritisation of services to children that extends beyond the council itself. Strategic partnerships are strong and there is good communication across both corporate and operational management. This is ensuring coordinated responses to children and families.

A stable and permanent workforce is in place and, in the majority of teams, there are manageable caseloads and good management support. This is enabling strong and purposeful relationships with children and the majority of children are making good progress. For a small minority of children in need or subject to child protection plans, particularly when there has been a legacy of longstanding and repeat instances of neglect or domestic abuse, the planning has not been timely. The lack of historic

early authoritative decision-making has meant that a small minority of children have had a delayed response to cumulative risk. A recent review of these children's cases under the current senior leadership team means they are now receiving an appropriate response. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) have competing workload demands, which have an impact on their capacity to provide effective challenge and ensure that written plans are always focused on the experience and progress of children.

What needs to improve?

- The response to children subject to historic repeated planning under child in need and child protection plans.
- Pathway planning for children aged 16 and 17.
- Clarity about the roles, responsibility and priorities of child protection chairs and independent reviewing officers to provide effective scrutiny and challenge of children's plans

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

1. Children in need of help and protection are receiving a good service. The vast majority of children and families are receiving services which meet their needs and effect change.
2. Children in need of early help receive support at the right time. Early help assessments are detailed and contain pertinent information leading to interventions which meet children's and families' needs. Effective strategic planning has ensured funding for a number of early intervention projects such as Children and Families Newcastle which embeds family partners in a range of community settings, and social workers in schools (SWIS). These projects are having a positive impact on identifying vulnerable children early and signposting services and support to prevent escalation into children's social care. Work being undertaken by the SWIS team is having a positive impact for children in identifying and supporting them early on. This is helping to prevent some children escalating into children's social care services.
3. Contacts made by professionals about children at the front door are timely, clear and detailed with the relevant information needed to inform decision-making. Consent is sought from families when agency checks are deemed necessary. Decision-making at the front door is proportionate to the level of risk to children and is directing families to the right service at the right time. There is good communication between the co-located partners within the multi-agency safeguarding hub to inform decision-making. Where there is a need for further assessment, this is swiftly allocated to social workers to ensure that families do not wait for a response and children's needs are assessed at the earliest opportunity.

4. When children need a response out of hours, the emergency duty team provides a prompt and effective response. This ensures that urgent needs are responded to so that children are protected in the evenings and weekends.
5. When risks to children escalate, multi-agency strategy meetings are well attended by the relevant professionals, who share detailed information to inform plans and decision-making. Subsequent child protection enquiries are detailed with a clear assessment of risk which then informs the next steps. As a result, children are receiving the right response to address risks.
6. The majority of children's assessments are thorough, with consideration of the views of parents and extended family. The voice of the child is clearly evident and informing assessments. Needs and risks are identified through the assessment process to ensure that children are receiving the right services to improve their circumstances.
7. The quality of child in need and child protection plans is inconsistent. Better plans have clear, measurable outcomes that focus on the needs of the child. Some children's plans are adult focused, rather than being specific to the child. Not all tasks have timescales and the intended outcomes of interventions to meet children's needs can get lost in the written plans. This is mitigated against, as the social workers know their children and have a grip on the planning.
8. Robust management oversight and decision-making is not consistently evident in longer-term planning for all children in need of help and protection. The electronic recording system is difficult to navigate and makes it difficult to locate key supervision records and management decisions. It is not easy to evidence that managers are consistently driving plans for children in need of help and protection. This was more evident in casework which had been open to the service for long periods of time, and where there have been longstanding issues of domestic abuse, neglect and emotional harm, and where children have had repeated or longstanding periods of interventions before they are considered under the pre-proceedings stage of the public law outline (PLO). This means that, for a small minority of children, it is not until an incident happens that they are then considered for legal oversight and planning under PLO.
9. Once children are considered under PLO, there is a more robust and timely response. Reports to legal planning meetings are detailed, which assists with decision-making. Family Group Conferences are being offered to include extended family members within PLO plans. This is helping to create plans of support and safety from within children's own support networks.
10. Children are seen regularly by their social worker at a level that meets their needs. This ensures that children can build trusting relationships with their social worker. Direct work is being undertaken with children to gain their views

and inform planning. Social workers advocate for children when needed to ensure that they get the services and interventions they require. However, children are not being routinely offered access to independent advocacy services which could offer them a stronger voice during child protection conferences.

11. Child protection conferences take place promptly and are well attended by partner agencies. The right children are made subject to child protection plans. Core group meetings are held at regular intervals and the child protection plan is reviewed. Written plans are not always clearly updated following these reviews, and although most children are making good progress this was not always reflected in updated child protection plans.
12. Disabled children receive a responsive service that is focused on their needs. Regular visits to children by consistent social workers enable children to build trusting relationships. Children's needs are well identified and plans are reviewed regularly in partnerships with other agencies.
13. The designated officer for the local authority is experienced, well informed and well connected with a wide range of partner agencies, which ensures a robust response to allegations against professionals. This ensures proportionate action to protect children.
14. When children are identified as being at risk of exploitation, there is a well-coordinated robust response. Multi-agency meetings are identifying risks and protection action is taken. Dedicated social workers for child sexual exploitation and for missing young people work alongside the allocated worker, which ensures a focus on the specialist need for the individual child. Return home interviews for children who have been missing from home and care are offered promptly and completed face to face to positively engage children and inform ongoing safety planning.
15. There are low numbers of children who are privately fostered. For most of these children, there is an effective response to ensure that the placement is assessed and supported.
16. For young people who present as homeless, there is an appropriate response and joint housing assessments offered to consider support needs and accommodation options. Children are given the opportunity to become children in care should they wish to. This ensures that children are found suitable accommodation when it is required.
17. For children reported as missing from education, appropriate checks are undertaken to see if there is a case history with children's social care. Pupils who are accessing education part time are effectively tracked to ensure that this is a temporary arrangement. Effective systems are in place to work with

families so that they understand the responsibilities of electively home educating children.

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

18. Most children enter care when it is in their best interests to do so. Social work reports to care and resource panel are detailed to support decision-making. Assessments and reports for court are mostly detailed and of good quality. They identify the children's needs and provide a clear rationale for future plans. This assists the court in making informed decisions for children subject to court proceedings. There have been some delays in court proceedings due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the judiciary confirmed this. The majority of current care proceedings are for the right children with the right care plans.
19. Children in care are seen and seen alone regularly by their social workers, who work hard to build meaningful relationships, often using creative ways to engage and communicate with them. This is ensuring that children's wishes are known and that their views are informing planning. Not all children have effective life story work completed to help them understand their history and circumstances.
20. Children return to their parents' care when it is safe for them to do so. Clear consideration is given to the level of risk and support required, and respects children's wishes to give the return home the greatest chance of success. Family time is encouraged and supported to ensure that children maintain links with their family. Where children cannot remain with their parents, other family members are considered and assessed to enable children to continue to live within their extended family.
21. Where family arrangements are not possible, the majority of children live in alternative stable placements that meet their needs well and where they are making good progress. Most children live in the local area with Newcastle foster carers. There has been a dedicated focus on bringing children back to Newcastle from out-of-area placements, in recognition that children wanted to live in their local area in homes that meet their local cultural needs. This has led to a range of bespoke arrangements and children being successfully rehabilitated home.
22. There has been an increase in foster carers despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. A targeted approach has been successful in recruiting applicants from more diverse backgrounds, as well as those who can meet the needs of children who have more complex needs.
23. For most children, permanence is being achieved in a timely manner. Children benefit from timely adoptions or placements with special guardians and connected carers. For some children, permanence decisions have been

purposefully delayed so that further assessments take place and to ensure that this is the right decision for the child. For some children, permanence decisions had been appropriately delayed in line with the child's wishes.

24. The right support and interventions are in place for most children in care to enable them to flourish. Most children's care plans contain the right actions to promote progress for children. Some written plans are too generic, and the outcomes focus on the assessment needs of the birth parents and their progress, rather than having a clear and direct focus to ensure that the child's experience is central to all planning.
25. Children's plans are regularly monitored through timely reviews led by a consistent IRO. Children have access to independent advocacy, but this is not well promoted to ensure that all children are able to participate in the review of their plan. Most IROs maintain some contact with children just prior to their review and maintain relationships with children over long periods of time.
26. Pathway plans for children aged 16 and 17 cover the key areas but are often brief, with children not being actively involved in their development and plans not feeling 'owned' by the child. Plans are not consistently driving better outcomes. Recent management absence has not enabled pathway plans for 16 and 17-year-olds to be robustly quality assured in this team. Senior managers are aware of the shortfall in this service and have completed their own audit of pathway plans. As a result, an appropriate development plan is in place to make improvements.
27. Early permanence, including foster to adopt, is mostly well considered for children who would benefit from such arrangements. There is tenacity in finding adoptive families for children. This includes older children and children with additional needs.
28. The virtual school has recently strengthened the system to track the attendance of children in care and this is beginning to have a positive impact. Attendance remains lower than the national average and the virtual school headteacher recognises there is still more to be done. There is evidence of strengthening outcomes in attainment in key stages 1, 2 and 4 in 2019; however, this data has been difficult to compare with national trends that have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021. Rates of permanent exclusions for children in care have fallen. The virtual school works with schools when there is potential for a breakdown in school placement, and will seek alternative provision to ensure that children have access to education.
29. The local authority has recently introduced the EPEP. This work is not well embedded or leading to improved educational outcomes for all children. Not all children over the age of 16 and care leavers in education have tailored support and guidance through the EPEP system, and this is instead embedded within pathway plans.

30. Children's healthcare needs are well considered in healthcare assessments, which lead to relevant health plans. Children in care are supported with leisure activities with other children, which promote their well-being and enhance their peer relationships.
31. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children receive a timely response when they arrive in the area. They are offered suitable care and accommodation. The emotional health needs of these children are well identified and supported. This ensures they are making good progress.
32. Care leavers are making good progress. The vast majority of care leavers are well supported by committed workers who know them well and who advocate for them effectively. Care leavers spoken to spoke highly of their workers and the support they are receiving. They feel that workers genuinely care about them and are ambitious for their future. This helps care leavers to have a secure base on which to negotiate the challenges and opportunities of adult life.
33. The physical health needs of care leavers are identified well, but there is not yet consistently available specific emotional health support from local health providers. The quality of written pathway plans does not always evidence the range of support and interventions that care leavers are receiving. Some pathway plans do not sufficiently include young people in their creation. The majority of care leavers do know what actions are being taken as a result of their pathway plan and are making measurable progress against pathway plan outcomes.
34. A high number of care leavers are in higher education, with young people actively encouraged and supported to embark on such journeys. When care leavers are not in education, employment or training, social workers focus on trying to engage young people in such activities. The local authority is expanding opportunities for all care leavers to find employment, apprenticeships and enriching opportunities in the wider council, and in private industries and businesses in Newcastle.
35. There is a wide range of accommodation options available for care leavers and the vast majority are in safe, suitable accommodation which meets their needs well. Young people only move into their own flats when ready to do so, which is helping to prevent tenancy breakdowns. When problems emerge, flexible floating support is available to help negotiate such difficulties.
36. Care leavers are effectively supported to apply for important documents and bank accounts that they will need to negotiate adult life. Care leavers understand their health histories, although not all have a written copy of their history which would assist them in their future.

37. Children in care and care leavers panels have high aspirations for children and young people. With the voice and influence team, children have held a number of takeover events where they have set out their priority areas to city leaders. This is ensuring that their views are shaping and influencing services.

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

38. Newcastle strives to promote a collective responsibility for ensuring that no child is left behind, reaching beyond the council. This creates a good foundation for promoting children's rights across a broad range of organisations in the city. Strategic partnerships in Newcastle are strong and there are positive cross-council directorate relationships. These relationships are effective to make prompt and positive responses for individual children when required, such as arranging work experience for specific children in care. Partnerships have been strengthened during the response to COVID-19 and these have continued as the local authority is returning to business as usual.

39. Strategic partnerships have been used to good effect to develop Children and Families Newcastle, incorporating services from community, voluntary and specialist services into community hubs. The service embeds family partners into a range of community settings to provide early support and signposting to vulnerable families. This service remains in its infancy and the impact will be measured as it embeds and grows.

40. The corporate parenting committee receives regular detailed performance reports and holds the senior management team to account. There is a good level of support and challenge through active participation at key committees and boards. Children's boards are well established and there is an active children's participation and voice in corporate parenting. Corporate support and strategic oversight for care leavers is not as strong. This means that not all care leavers get enough support with apprenticeships and securing employment. Senior managers acknowledge this and have recently started to strengthen this area of work.

41. The variety of quality assurance and performance data conversations throughout the management teams enable a clear understanding of the quality of social work practice. The quality assurance programme includes a diverse range of activities, of which case file auditing is only a small part. Biannual practice weeks provide a deep dive into the experiences of children and young people. Senior managers, including the chief executive and the portfolio holder for children, have taken part in these practice weeks to give them opportunities to sit alongside social workers and get a good understanding of the quality and impact of social work practice. Practice weeks include gathering a large amount of direct feedback from individual children, families and carers. Feedback from complaints is also used for learning and development. This is

helping to ensure that children's and families' views are being used to develop services and improve practice.

42. Performance practice meetings are held regularly with practitioners and managers to develop a shared understanding of performance and identify areas for thematic audits and improvement. There are a broad range of key performance indicators reported on monthly, with trends identified. This is ensuring that managers know their strengths and areas for development.
43. Numerous senior management panels are providing regular oversight of legal planning, children's cases in PLO, and children entering care. The senior management footprint is evident in these children's files. Operational management oversight is more variable. The majority of social workers report regular and helpful management discussions and informal supervision that is effective and is delivering better outcomes for children. This is not always evident on the case management recording system, and supervision records sometimes lack reflection.
44. IROs have competing demands with a combined caseload of child protection reviews, children in care reviews, and foster carer annual reviews. As a result, they do not routinely review the progress of children's plans in between reviews. The formal escalation process is not embedded and not consistently used to provide an additional level of scrutiny and challenge. This was most evident in the small minority of legacy children's cases, where some drift and delay had occurred before more recent robust action had been taken.
45. The 16-plus team holds responsibility for 16 and 17-year-olds in need of help and protection and children in care. In these teams, there is currently a lack of consistent decisive management grip and oversight. Recent staff sickness has resulted in a period of reduced management support. This has left some workers without clear case direction. Managers have not been consistently addressing some of the poorer social work practice in this team. Senior managers are aware of some of the issues in this team and have recruited new managers to improve this situation.
46. Social workers are positive about working for Newcastle. They feel well supported through their induction and speak of supportive and available managers. There is a clear workforce development strategy and workforce development plan which ensure that workers are offered a range of training and development opportunities, and progression is supported and encouraged. There are low rates of agency staff and there is stability in the workforce. This ensures that children have stable, allocated social workers they can develop relationships with.
47. The vast majority of newly qualified social workers feel supported, with protected caseloads and access to training and workshops and regular supervision from both their team managers and consultant. This is ensuring

that they can learn and develop their social work skills safely and in line with their development.



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