

Inspection of Stockport local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 28 March to 1 April 2022

Lead inspector: Lorna Schlechte, 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

Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council continues to provide good services for children in need of help and protection and children in care and care leavers. The strong quality of practice and services for families has been maintained, despite the high levels of COVID-19 and an increase in demand across the service. There continues to be a strong early help offer and an increased focus on prevention, early intervention and mental health support for the most vulnerable children and families during the pandemic. Children in care and care leavers receive very effective support that meets their needs.

Since the last inspection in 2017, senior leaders have focused relentlessly on further embedding the principles of systemic, restorative and relationship-based working enshrined in the Stockport Family approach. This is extremely well understood across an integrated system of social care, early help, health and education and is supported by extensive training across the partnership. Social workers value this approach and told inspectors it was one of the reasons they liked working in the local authority. It successfully promotes a strong and supportive culture, where children receive the right level of support at the right time.

Areas for improvement identified in the previous inspection, and in the subsequent focused visit in 2019, have been largely addressed. For example, children's plans, strategy meetings and the role of the local authority designated officer (LADO) have

all improved and the quality of social work practice continues to be consistently strong. Senior leaders have plans for developing areas for service improvement, but do not always have sufficiently detailed understanding of some discrete areas of practice. Management oversight is not always as robust as it needs to be.

What needs to improve?

- The consistent application of management oversight in relation to visits to children, recording, supervision, trackers and audit actions.
- The quality of personal education plans (PEPs) for children in care.

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

1. There are a good range of early help services available to support children and families in Stockport who need additional help in their lives. For most families, the early help response is seamless and ensures that families receive help quickly. In a small number of cases, inspectors saw repeat contacts from various professionals where families had not experienced a sufficiently timely and helpful response.
2. The multi-agency professionals in the first response team in the multi-agency safeguarding and support hub (MASSH) thoroughly consider the presenting risks, parental consent, and history of involvement with children and families by agencies. This leads to well-informed decision-making to support a broad range of needs. Management oversight in the first response team is evident at key decision points. There is a daily risk-management meeting for relevant agencies to discuss high-risk cases of domestic abuse, and a staying safe panel for missing children. This ensures that children's needs are carefully considered and the threshold to provide support is appropriately applied. Due to the high volume of contacts received, the triage on a small number of cases takes longer than necessary to evaluate whether families would benefit from a formal assessment and social work support.
3. When there are safeguarding concerns for a child, children's cases are promptly transferred over to the locality teams. Strategy meetings are effective in identifying whether there is a need for a child-protection investigation, and in agreeing actions to safeguard children and investigating issues. When referrals for children are made out of hours (OOH), these services provide a robust and consistently strong response. OOH workers communicate effectively with daytime services.
4. Domestic abuse practitioners in the Aspire service work collaboratively with a range of organisations and practitioners, offering expert advice and providing professional support to address risks in families. This includes the Caring Dads programme. Work is undertaken in a systemic way, using detailed risk

assessments to explore patterns of risk. There is access to a psychologist and therapeutic social workers to help families understand the impact of trauma on children and parental behaviour. This ensures that support is flexible and creative and clearly informs safety planning to reduce risk for children.

5. Inspectors saw consistently positive practice in the locality social work teams. Social workers are professionally curious and reflective, and use their relationship-based practice to build effective, trusting relationships with children and their families. Working alongside colleagues in the specialist substance misuse service, Mosaic, they are effective in achieving positive change for families, such as improvements in parenting, home conditions and school attendance.
6. Assessments are detailed and reflective and consider the impact of parental behaviours on children's emotional well-being. Inspectors saw strong examples of direct work being completed with children to inform the outcomes of assessments. Pre-birth assessments are timely and ensure that children are safeguarded once born. A range of tools, including the Graded Care Profile, are used to complete assessments, alongside partners such as health, to ensure that neglect is clearly recognised and responded to.
7. Most visits to children are completed regularly and purposefully, by social workers in the locality teams, to ensure that risks and protective factors are clearly understood. Children at risk of harm have continued to be seen face-to-face during the pandemic, which ensures that social workers know their children well and see them alone. However, inspectors found that, in a very small number of cases, the frequency of the visits was not sufficiently responsive to the level of assessed risk. Senior leaders responded to this by reiterating existing guidance, ensuring that visits are proportionate to the level of risk.
8. Plans are clear and focus on an appropriate range of activity and interventions for parents and children, including for disabled children. They are specific, timebound and purposeful. Expectations of parents are clearly detailed in realistic actions and effective help is provided through support from skilled social workers and other professionals, such as school staff, which means that children's risks and needs reduce and their situation improves. This is a significant improvement since the last inspection.
9. Child-protection conferences consider progress and assess risk effectively to make decisions about thresholds. Core groups and 'team around the child' meetings are well attended by the relevant agencies and appropriately focus on progressing plans to improve children's safety and welfare. There is an influential parent-reference group, which is consulted regularly about the child-protection conference process, and this has led to significant changes to improve the quality of participation by family members.

10. There is effective consideration of emerging risk, which ensures that, when required, children step up from children in need to child protection or to pre-proceedings. Thresholds are clearly applied to ensure that children are being safeguarded and not exposed to further risk. The New Beginnings programme has ensured very tailored support to families with children on a child-protection plan and this leads to a high level of support to reduce risk for children.
11. Most pre-proceedings activity is highly effective, resulting in a significant number of cases where risk has been successfully reduced and cases stepped down from pre-proceedings. Relational social work and restorative practice continue to be real strengths and are viewed positively within the court arena. The local authority's system for tracking children in pre-proceedings is not as sufficiently robust and, in a small number of cases, there has been limited focus on ensuring that progress is clearly recorded, in order to provide a rationale for next steps.
12. The LADO is highly experienced in the role, and capacity has been increased to address high levels of demand. Allegations management processes are followed appropriately, meetings are held and recorded in detail, and appropriate steps are taken to safeguard children. An online training course was recently set up to ensure that the key principles underpinning LADO activity are understood across the partnership. This is an improved area of practice since the last inspection.
13. Complex safeguarding risks are responded to effectively by the large, multi-disciplinary Aspire service, which is made up of therapeutic social workers, missing-from-home officers, specialist domestic abuse workers and the police Phoenix team. Risk assessments of child exploitation and domestic abuse are detailed and provide a clear rationale for actions to be taken. 'Trigger plans' for children who are persistently missing from home ensure that partners gain a clear understanding of children's vulnerabilities and risks associated with hotspot areas. The staying safe panel is well attended and ensures that appropriate safety plans are put in place.
14. The support for private fostering arrangements is good. There is a timely and consistent response to young people who present as homeless, underpinned by well-established and close partnership working between housing and children's social care.
15. Children who are missing education receive a robust response. The 'team around the school' model, where social workers are linked to schools and attend 'team around the school' meetings, ensures that schools access prompt expertise and advice from a range of health and social care services. This is successfully helping to support children and families at an earlier stage. Children who are electively home-educated are supported by a specialist team. Although there has been a focus on ensuring that those most

vulnerable are visited in response to an increase in numbers during the pandemic, there is a group of children who have not been contacted recently. Senior leaders responded promptly when inspectors raised this and are now rolling out a more comprehensive approach.

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

16. Children come into care in a timely and well-considered way, when it is in their best interests to do so. The majority of children are known to children's services prior to becoming looked after, through child-protection planning and pre-proceedings. Stockport Families First provides appropriate support to children on the edge of care.
17. Strong relationship-based social work enables social workers to know children well and articulate children's needs clearly. Social workers visit children regularly and see them alone to gain their wishes and feelings and complete direct work. The visits to children in out-of-area placements are not always frequent enough for a small number of children.
18. Children's physical and emotional health needs are clearly recognised and responded to well, and they are able to access tailored mental health services from therapeutic social workers and a psychologist in the emotional and well-being team when needed.
19. The virtual school has strong relationships with schools. This ensures that appropriate provision is discussed routinely to address pupils' support needs. This is not reflected sufficiently in the quality of PEPs, which do not consistently identify clear targets to measure progress.
20. Care plans are reviewed regularly and implemented effectively. Reviews result in a clear rationale for permanence and other care-planning decisions. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) are proactive and have wide-ranging oversight, which adds value in assuring quality and overcoming any emerging barriers. IROs complete mid-point reviews and regularly involve children in their reviews. Children have access to advocacy support if appropriate.
21. Most children benefit from stable placements close to Stockport, which meet their needs well. For the small number of children who have to move placement, social workers are appropriately focused on achieving stability, working closely with carers to prepare children and to help them settle. Inspectors saw some very positive work undertaken with children who have experienced multiple moves in residential care, who have subsequently become more settled, benefiting from the creative work undertaken in Stockport Families First based on the principles of the No Wrong Door innovation.

22. Where possible, children are placed with family and friends. Viability assessments are promptly undertaken but there can be delays in these being written up formally. Although there has been no detriment to children as a result of this delay in recording, management oversight and decision-making are not always sufficiently clear when decisions are made to proceed to a connected carer assessment. The local authority has recently invested in this part of the service, by funding the newly established connected carer fostering team.
23. Permanence is well considered for most children, although the mechanism for tracking plans for permanence by managers means that senior leaders cannot always be assured that permanence has been achieved in a timely way for all children. A small number of children experience delays in matching and confirmation of permanence with their long-term carers.
24. The needs of children in care are well understood and the local authority has commissioned a suitable range of placements and specialist services that meet children's needs effectively and support placement stability. Services such as intensive support workers (ISWs) in Stockport Families First, the Mosaic service, and the child and adolescent mental health services offer tailored support to build relationships and target help where it is needed most.
25. Children benefit from well-planned family time, which is regularly reviewed and adapted to changing circumstances, and it is always informed by what is in the best interests of the child.
26. Most children return home when it is in their best interests to do so on a planned basis following consideration by multi-agency meetings. Ongoing plans are put in place to ensure that families receive the right support to successfully care for their children.
27. Children at risk of exploitation benefit from specialist child-exploitation workers in the Aspire service who work effectively with them and other agencies to reduce risks. Children who regularly go missing receive a high level of support, with specialist support and plans in place to reduce risk. Return home interviews are undertaken, although these vary in their effectiveness.
28. There is a strong training offer to foster carers, although timeliness of training has been affected by the pandemic. The fostering panel is robust, well chaired and includes a care-experienced adult. Foster carers feel well supported and the quality of assessments is good. The local authority has extended the Mockingbird scheme to attract new carers, support retention and ensure that the success of the first cohort can be replicated.
29. Adopters benefit from good-quality recruitment, assessment and support through the regional adoption agency, Adoption Counts. Although there have

been increased pressures on the adoption support service during the pandemic, adopters were very positive about the level of support they had received during the adoption process. Life-story work is completed in a timely manner for adopted children.

30. Care leavers who spoke with inspectors were overwhelmingly positive about the support they receive from their workers. Most care leavers are seen regularly by a consistent personal adviser (PA) who knows them well and is responsive to their individual needs. Care leavers of any age are welcomed back to the service if they need support, and some benefit from the added value of ISWs and lifelong links to reduce social isolation and increase support networks.
31. Care leavers benefit from a comprehensive and accessible local offer, including a council tax waiver, free Wi-Fi, gym membership, a budget to supplement setting up home and other allowances. Most young people start to build a relationship with their PA before they reach 18. The local authority has invested in three additional PA posts to ensure that young people continue to receive support for their transition at an early stage. Pathway plans are timely and regularly updated, and it is a real strength that IROs continue to review plans for care leavers up to age 25. There are appropriate plans to review the pathway plan template to ensure that it meets the needs of young people.
32. Care leavers can access a range of suitable accommodation and they are well supported to prepare for adulthood at a pace appropriate to their individual needs, including staying put with former foster carers. The service has established strong links with a range of organisations, including the commissioned charity Pure Insight, which provides wraparound care for young people up to the age of 28, including support with their emotional health, physical well-being, social isolation and parenthood. Pure Insight provides a drop-in cafe, psychological well-being workers and activity days, which were maintained throughout the pandemic to combat social isolation.
33. There are a range of opportunities available to support young people, including apprenticeships and funding for further education. Care leavers have access to a wide range of support from a dedicated education, employment and training worker and commissioned services to provide support with interview and pre-employment skills and ongoing support once in employment.
34. Education provision for post-16 young people is generally strong. Council-run internships and apprenticeships for care-experienced young people are a growing success and accessible, but other post-16 apprenticeship opportunities can be limited. This is because too many children who are looked after do not get the qualifications that they need at the end of key stage 4.

35. There is a strong corporate-wide commitment to care leavers. The care leavers forum and the New Belongings project ensure that care leavers feel listened to and valued, and are provided with opportunities in having a say in how changes are made.

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

36. Since the last inspection, social work practice has remained consistently strong, and areas for improvement have been appropriately actioned. The quality of plans, strategy meetings, awareness of the LADO role and the response to allegations about professionals have improved. Senior leaders have maintained a relentless focus on making further improvements and understand the need to ensure a more consistent approach to the management oversight of supervision, recording and caseloads.
37. The well-established integrated model Stockport Family has provided a strong foundation for responding to COVID-19. The local authority's self-assessment demonstrates that they know themselves well and have high-level plans to address current challenges in the context of rising demand during the pandemic. A sound awareness of local need has informed the recent realignment of social work teams into localities. There is also a genuine commitment to reduce transition points for children and build in stronger links with local schools. This strategic approach has ensured that good-quality social work practice and provision for children are maintained, although there are some discrete areas of practice that require more robust management oversight.
38. The director of children's services (DCS) is an experienced leader with a sharp focus on what matters most for children. There have been some recent changes in the senior leadership team, as the DCS has taken on the director of adult social services role, but stability in the senior leadership team has been maintained, capacity has increased, and recruitment is well underway to support a smooth transition. Senior leaders are good role models for their staff, and are accessible, visible and well respected.
39. The corporate parenting strategy is informed by the views of young people and has clear strategic objectives, and the board is appropriately focused on providing the right support to children in care and care leavers. There is an extensive offer to care leavers, mental health support has been enhanced, and work is now underway to develop participation of young people in the corporate parenting board. There is a strong corporate commitment to invest in children's services and to champion the needs of care leavers up to the age of 25.

40. There is a comprehensive sufficiency strategy for children in care and care leavers which promotes the development of specific types of placements in response to identified need. All care leavers are discussed at the accommodation panel prior to turning 18. There is an effective partnership with housing, leading to improved housing options with appropriate levels of support being commissioned for care leavers, depending on their individual needs.
41. The service has continued to focus on innovative projects, such as the family drug and alcohol court pilot, which is highly valued by the courts and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service. This project engages families and provides a strong evidence base to support key decisions within the court arena. The No Wrong Door approach helps children with a turbulent placement history become more settled with specially trained carers, and the New Beginnings programme provides additional support for families whose children are subject to child-protection plans. These creative initiatives are based on a sound understanding and knowledge of the needs of families and children, and they are frequently co-produced with them. This ensures that services are shaped around the needs of the people who experience them.
42. The local authority has a strong learning culture. This is based on a reflective approach, a willingness to listen and an ability to be solution-focused and deliver practical improvements to sustain change. Learning circles disseminate important messages from practice reviews and serious case reviews across the partnership. During this inspection, senior leaders were very reflective and acted promptly to address emerging issues, including bringing forward a review of the early help pathway and increased scrutiny of decision-making in the MASSH. They also recognised that there is more to do to improve the quality of management oversight in relation to pre-proceedings and shared an action plan during the inspection to this effect, which ensures that more robust processes are now in place. Although senior leaders are receptive to feedback and proactive in their response, with a continuous focus on improvement, there were some inconsistencies in relation to management oversight, which were only identified and responded to during the inspection.
43. There is now a good understanding of performance data, which has improved since the last inspection. This is used appropriately to interrogate practice shortfalls, identify trends and inform a range of quality assurance activity. Practice reviews (audits) are detailed, reflective and completed in partnership with the social worker and family during regular practice weeks, which supports learning. They are accurate and moderation clearly adds value, but actions are not always progressed in set timescales or monitored in supervision in order to demonstrate their impact on practice.
44. The quality of social work practice in Stockport remains of a high standard, and Stockport Family is fully embedded and leads to some very effective multi-agency working, which benefits children and families. There are some

areas of practice that require further refinement to ensure more consistent management oversight across three service areas and the recently aligned 11 locality teams. However, there has not been any deterioration of practice and the senior leadership team is well supported at a corporate level, with appropriate clarity of purpose to further improve and develop.

45. There have been some challenges in terms of workforce stability during the pandemic, including a slight increase in vacant social work posts, and senior leaders have recognised the need to invest more in the social care workforce in a competitive job market. The use of agency workers is carefully monitored, and social workers value the flexible, hybrid approach to working practices.
46. Social workers are highly motivated, skilled and committed practitioners. They are proud of their work and genuinely want to make a difference for children. They benefit from a range of training and development opportunities and progression is supported and encouraged. The support for social workers in their first assessed and supported year of employment has been enhanced and the second supported year in employment is unique in the region, offering regular check-ins and learning sets. The practice observation programme panel reviews the quality of systemic social work practice and has strong links to a local university. The local authority encourages a high number of student placements and social work apprenticeships. It is a strength that being a partner in practice, supporting other local authorities through sector-led improvement since 2018, creates professional development opportunities for middle management as well as senior leaders. This supports staff retention.
47. Senior leaders recognise that caseloads have been too high in some teams. However, there is continual oversight of caseloads to improve practice. Additional investment has led to continued funding until 2023 of two extra social work teams and three additional PAs in the care leaver service, which is beginning to reduce caseloads in some teams.
48. Supervision is regular, although it is not always sufficiently reflective and the recording can be variable. Despite this, social workers told us that supervision is helpful and supports their learning, and it is positive that individual supervision is supplemented by group supervision opportunities.



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