

Inspection of Stoke-on-Trent local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 3 to 14 October 2022

Lead inspectors: Rebecca Qusted, His Majesty's Inspector, and Matthew Reed, His Majesty's Inspector

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

Services for vulnerable children and families in Stoke-on-Trent have improved substantially since the last inspection in February 2019, when services were found to be inadequate. The previous systemic failures have been addressed incrementally, with progress made despite the adversity of the COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders acknowledge that further improvements are needed to ensure a consistently good service for all children.

Significant progress has been made in some areas, such as the 'front door' service and in achieving permanence for children in care. A permanent senior leadership team has a clear vision for ongoing improvements. The improvement work is supported politically, with investment in children's services seen as part of a wider council development programme. There is a coordinated and relentless drive to continue to improve children's experiences.

Not all children experience consistently effective social work practice, particularly in the children's safeguarding and support service (CSS). This is due to some staff turnover, workload pressures and inconsistency in management oversight and support. All areas of practice identified as in need of improvement at the last inspection have been progressed. However, there is further improvement required in the quality of case recording, timely completion of life-story work, management oversight and further stability in staffing capacity. Senior leaders understand the

quality of frontline practice well, due to improved performance information, quality assurance arrangements and peer scrutiny. Leaders acknowledge that there is still more to do to ensure that all children benefit from improved services.

What needs to improve?

- The quality and effectiveness of child in need and child protection plans.
- Workloads of child protection chairs and independent reviewing officers, and the process of escalation and challenge by independent chairs to ensure timely progression of children's plans.
- The assessment of private fostering arrangements, including the timely completion of safeguarding checks.
- Life-story work for all children in care, to support their understanding of the reasons for them being in care.
- Opportunities for children in care and care leavers' participation in strategic planning.
- Management oversight and supervision, to ensure the quality and consistency of children's records and to drive progress.

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

1. Since the last inspection, improvements have been made in many aspects of help and protection services for children. However, there remain areas of practice that require improvement to ensure that all children receive a consistently good service.
2. Children benefit from a range of early help services. Early help assessments and child-focused plans are detailed and thorough, which supports the timely recognition of need and provision of services for most children. There is a clear interface between early help and the front door. Families are stepped up or stepped down to statutory services appropriately and, as a result, children receive the right support at the right time.
3. A well-embedded children's advice and duty service (CHAD) ensures that most children's needs are identified in a timely way. Thresholds are applied well and effective conversations between professionals ensure that appropriate information is shared to inform decision-making. Parental consent is well understood and is sought appropriately or dispensed with if there are safeguarding concerns. Whenever possible, social workers speak with children to gain a holistic picture, to ensure that they get the right help.
4. Decision-making in the CHAD is appropriate. Effective joint working with the police ensures that concerns about domestic abuse are directed to the right service quickly. When safeguarding concerns are identified, there is timely escalation to strategy meetings to assess risk. Strategy meetings are well

attended by relevant partners, who share appropriate information. This results in effective decision-making to safeguard children.

5. Child protection enquiries are detailed and include analysis of historical and current information. Children's views are also sought to inform next steps. Outcomes of child protection enquiries accurately identify risk of significant harm, which supports professionals in their decision-making regarding initial child protection conferences. However, some records lack clarity, with information cut and pasted from different documents and with insufficient focus on what is important.
6. The emergency duty team (EDT) provides an effective response out of hours. An additional layer of support provided by the family and adolescent support team (FAST) supports children and families during weekends and evenings. Communication between the workers in EDT and daytime services is well integrated, ensuring seamless support to children and families.
7. The local authority designated officer service ensures that allegations made about professionals and volunteers who work with children are managed swiftly and effectively. There is a timely multi-agency response and a focus on the child's views and feelings. This ensures that appropriate steps are taken to safeguard children.
8. Social worker vacancies have resulted in a small number of children being allocated to team managers for a short period of time or to conclude pieces of work. At the time of the inspection, this had reduced to a very small number. However, this has led to delays in some children's assessments starting and, as a result, some risks for children that were not fully assessed. The quality of assessments is variable. Most are comprehensive, including those prepared for child protection conferences, leading to children receiving appropriate support. However, some are weaker and lack sufficient detail to consider the needs of all the children in the family. Consequently, for these families there is an incomplete picture of children's needs and parental capacity to meet them.
9. Disabled children are safeguarded effectively. Holistic assessments of children who have a disability lead to good-quality planning to meet their needs. Social workers know their children well and advocate on their behalf to ensure they and their families are in receipt of the services they need.
10. Management oversight of frontline practice is inconsistent and does not drive plans to reduce risk for all children effectively. Critical evaluation and reflective supervision are underdeveloped in the duty and assessment part of the service. Supervision is not consistently recorded and does not always take place at an appropriate frequency. As a result, agreed actions are not always followed through in order to progress plans for all children in a timescale that is right for them.

11. Children in need and child protection plans are not of a consistently good standard. Some children's progress is hampered by plans in which actions to meet their needs are not clearly defined. This is further exacerbated by changes of social worker, resulting in a stop/start approach to help and protect some children.
12. The effectiveness of child protection chairs in escalating concerns about drift and delay in child protection planning is limited. Due to high caseloads, child protection chairs do not monitor the progression of plans for all children effectively. This has led to delays for a small number of children in entering pre-proceedings.
13. Parents do not always get the support they need to address domestic abuse, and this impacts on children's well-being. Delays in the provision of services for adults and children where domestic abuse is a concern mean that families do not get the help they need in a timescale that meets their needs.
14. Families are not consistently able to access family group conferences at a time that is right for them to prevent the need for further social work intervention. When they are used, family group conferences result in effective safety plans which support children to remain living with family and friends in their communities.
15. Children are appropriately subject to the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline (PLO) when risks do not reduce through child protection planning. Most letters before proceedings help parents understand what the concerns are and what needs to change. Although the quality and timeliness of parenting assessments are variable, there has been success in diverting some children away from court proceedings and enabling them to remain with their families. When risks do not sufficiently reduce, most decision-making is timely in securing the legal protection of a court order, and children become looked after at the right time for them. However, there is a small group of children who experience delay before entering pre-proceedings or coming into care, leaving them in neglectful situations for too long.
16. Children are routinely visited in line with their need and risk, but the recording of visits does not consistently evidence the purpose of visits or analysis of the information gained. Most children are seen and their views are recorded. For some children, thoughtful direct work sensitively captures their voices, which influences care planning.
17. When children go missing from care or are being exploited, strong systems are in place to closely monitor their welfare. A dedicated child exploitation team works successfully with the police and other agencies to protect children. There is close monitoring through multi-agency meetings of children missing from care and those at risk of exploitation. Comprehensive systems are in place to ensure that return home interviews take place. Information-sharing informs mapping and leads to disruption activity at an individual and wider community

level. Social workers identify risks well and build relationships effectively with children to reduce risk.

18. Children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless are routinely provided with information about their rights and entitlements in a timely manner. An effective joint response with housing department colleagues leads to children's needs being met effectively, including becoming a child in care when this is appropriate.
19. Safeguarding children who are privately fostered is an area of vulnerability. Only a few children are subject to these arrangements, despite appropriate awareness raising. Visits to children in private fostering arrangements are regular and direct work helps to influence their plans. Assessment quality is variable and statutory checks are not completed in a timely way to ensure that children subject to private fostering arrangements are safeguarded.
20. An effective system is in place for tracking pupils who are electively home educated. The well-being of children who miss education at school is monitored appropriately through regular communication with families and tutors to review their safety and academic progress.

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

21. Services to children in care and care leavers in Stoke-on-Trent have improved significantly since the inspection in 2019. There is a focus on achieving permanence, with an increasing number of children placed with adopters, special guardians and long-term foster carers. This provides children with the necessary stability to flourish.
22. Most children come into care at a time that is right for them. Decisions are endorsed by senior managers, with early permanence for children considered from the outset. A significant number of children benefit from living in foster to adopt arrangements, which ensures that they achieve security and stability promptly.
23. Applications to court are timely for most children. Social workers' evidence for court is comprehensive and detailed, which enables courts to make well-informed decisions. Decisions for brothers and sisters to live together or to be separated are informed by high-quality 'together or apart' assessments. As a result, whenever possible, brothers and sisters live together with carers who are able to meet their needs.
24. Children in care are seen regularly by their social workers and in line with their needs. Most visits are child-focused and there is evidence of direct work with

some children to ascertain their views, which then influence care planning. Some children benefit from having life-story work completed with them, and some have books and later-life letters to help them understand their histories and experiences. However, this work is not always completed in a timely way and is missing from too many children's records. This does not support children to understand why they are in care or to understand in later life why decisions were made for them.

25. Assessments of children in care are detailed and updated regularly before each child's review. The review of children's plans mostly takes place within statutory timescales. Minutes are sensitively written to help children understand the progress of their plans. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) know children well and a large proportion of children contribute effectively to their reviews.
26. IROs' caseloads are too high for them to consistently monitor children's circumstances or visit them in between reviews. IROs escalate concerns appropriately. However, managers do not consistently respond, which limits the effectiveness of this process and the progress of a small number of children's plans.
27. Most children in care experience stability because they are living in permanent homes that meet their needs. However, due to sufficiency issues, some children experience a small number of placement moves before being matched with carers who can meet their long-term needs. Children who live outside of Stoke-on-Trent are not disadvantaged and receive the same level of service as all other children in care. Most children benefit from well-planned family time, which supports children to maintain their sense of identity.
28. Placement sufficiency remains an ongoing challenge, especially for children with the most complex needs. For the very small number of children living in unregistered placements, senior leaders maintain high levels of scrutiny through regular social work visits, quality assurance visits and multi-agency meetings. This enables them to maintain effective oversight until a suitable regulated provision becomes available.
29. Recent changes in the management of the fostering service have resulted in better targeted recruitment strategies. There has been a focus on recruiting therapeutic foster carers who have had some success in providing placements for groups of brothers and sisters. Despite the overall number of in-house foster carers having decreased, the overall number of fostering places available has increased. However, there is more to do and foster carer recruitment remains a priority for the local authority to meet their sufficiency targets. Foster carers, including connected carers, are appropriately assessed, trained and supported. As a result, foster carers are well equipped to meet the needs of children in their care.
30. There is close and collaborative working between the local authority and the regional adoption agency (Together4children), which enables workers to match

children with adopters effectively. Adopters are provided with the required training throughout their adoption journey and post-adoption support is provided to meet children's individual needs.

31. The virtual school is starting to make a positive difference to the educational experiences of children in care in Stoke-on-Trent. The virtual school team has improved its oversight and influence. This is resulting in stronger personal education plans (PEPs) for children in care and their educational experience is being enhanced. However, for children over 16 years the quality of PEPs continues to be variable, and there is more to do.
32. The emotional and mental health needs of children in care are appropriately met. Many children in care, and their carers, benefit from both direct support and consultation. Children are encouraged to participate in various activities and hobbies to develop their social skills and emotional well-being.
33. Most children who go missing from care and who are at risk of exploitation receive effective support. Safety plans with clear actions are developed at multi-agency meetings. Children who go missing from care are routinely offered return home interviews. However, records of these interviews are not always held on the local authority's electronic recording system. This means that these important records cannot be accessed by professionals or used to safeguard children effectively.
34. Children who are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) receive tailored support which recognises their individual needs for a range of practical and emotional support. Children are placed in a variety of accommodation settings which meet their identity and cultural needs.
35. Children's participation is underdeveloped for both children in care and care leavers. Despite inspectors meeting with some very articulate children, the Children in Care Council has only six regular attendees. This limits the capacity for children and young people to influence strategic development and services in Stoke-on-Trent.
36. Care leavers benefit from longstanding, positive and trusting relationships with personal advisors (PAs) who know and understand their needs well. Transition arrangements are well planned and children are allocated to PAs from the age of 16 or 17 years. Despite high caseloads for some PAs, they are committed to ensuring that the needs of care leavers are met. PAs often go over and above to ensure that care leavers are supported, and they advocate on their behalf effectively. As a result, care leavers have a trusted adult they know they can rely on.
37. Most care leavers are living in appropriate accommodation that meets their needs. Some care leavers benefit from being able to access the impressive 'House Project' in order to gain independence skills and successfully move into their own tenancies.

38. PAs ensure that care leavers are made aware of the local offer and their rights and entitlements, and that they are helped to access grants and financial support. However, not all care leavers have access to key documents, including passports. Most pathway plans are thorough and reflect care leavers' needs and goals. However, they do not always reflect current circumstances and some actions are generic and are not consistently aspirational.
39. Care leavers are supported by their PAs to access services to improve their physical and mental health. However, not all care leavers are provided with their full health histories, which means they do not have full information about their health at the time they leave care. Leaders are aware of this and have a system in place to provide all care leavers with this information.
40. Care leavers who are parents are well supported with their emotional health, practical issues, such as budgeting and housing, as well as advice about parenting. Those care leavers who are in custody receive an improved service. PAs visit regularly and advocate on their behalf. This ensures that there is careful planning for when care leavers are released from custody. Care leavers over the age of 21 receive effective support from allocated PAs which meets their identified needs.
41. Care leavers' education, employment and training are prioritised effectively by their PAs. For those young people who are in education, employment or training, PAs ensure that they receive the right benefits and bursaries. For those who are not, they are supported to access work coaches and career advisers and to apply for jobs.

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

42. Senior leaders have made significant improvements to children's services from a very low base. As the senior leadership team has stabilised, the pace of progress has increased. Strong political support and financial investment have resulted in improvements across many services, such as the revised early help offer, restructured front door services, improved partnership working and a relentless focus on achieving permanence for children. While progress has been made against the recommendations from the last inspection, senior leaders recognise there is more to do to improve social work practice.
43. Senior leaders know their service well. The quality assurance framework has been revised and audits provide senior leaders with a line of sight to the quality of services. Auditors attempt to complete audits in collaboration with social workers. However, leaders are aware that workload pressures and turnover of social workers limit the opportunity to do so. Feedback from children and families is not consistently obtained as part of the audit process in order to explore the effectiveness of social work practice. Learning from these audits is

also limited as moderation does not take place contemporaneously. This means social workers do not always receive accurate feedback to drive forward practice. Senior leaders have learned from the thematic audits and this has resulted in targeted changes to practice, including revised guidance on step up/step down processes between early help and statutory services, the development of a permanence tracker and a policy for care leavers leaving custody. The local authority is responsive to most complaints, but it is not always clear what learning is taken from them in order to inform the ongoing development and improvement of services.

44. A wide variety of performance reports enable senior leaders to monitor performance effectively against trends. Multi-agency governance structures and partnerships have been strengthened, which has led to tangible improvements in some areas, such as the virtual school and the front door service. The Stoke-on-Trent Safeguarding Partnership was developed 12 months ago and provides a greater focus on the needs of children. This, however, remains relatively new and there are clear plans for further development.
45. The local authority acts as a committed corporate parent. The leader of the council and lead member are dedicated to ensuring that outcomes for the children of Stoke-on-Trent improve. There has been investment in additional social workers and in longer-term projects to improve sufficiency of residential care for disabled children with complex needs. The engagement of children with the corporate parenting board is improving but not fully embedded. Care leavers are involved in interviewing staff and foster carers and in producing leaflets for social workers and for children who are entering care. This ensures that children and young people's views influence services. However, there is more to do to ensure that more children participate in these activities.
46. The local authority works well with improvement partners and has been open to external scrutiny and peer review in order to develop services. Feedback from external partner agencies, such as the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service and the family courts, highlights that senior leaders are responsive to concerns raised and are committed to working in partnership to ensure that improvements are made in services for children.
47. Despite the progress that has been made, there remain areas of practice that require improvement. For example, the quality of children's case records is inconsistent. Supervision frequency and records to demonstrate managers' oversight in progressing plans are variable. Some delays in starting assessments and, for a small number of children, delays in progressing plans, result in these children remaining in situations of harm for too long. In addition, the workloads of child protection chairs and IROs are too high, which limits their ability to maintain effective oversight of children's plans. Senior leaders are aware of the fragility of some improvements and the need to ensure adequate staffing to improve children's experiences. Plans are in place for further recruitment of additional staff. However, pressure remains on the current workforce.

48. There is a comprehensive development and progression offer for social workers in Stoke-on-Trent. There has been previous success in the recruitment of social workers and the local authority has also adopted a 'grow your own' approach. However, recent vacancies have resulted in higher workloads for some social work staff. As a result, some staff have not been able to access all the training and development opportunities available.
49. Most social workers are positive about working for Stoke-on-Trent. They describe team managers as being visible and supportive. Social workers report that supervision is regular, reflective and task-setting, but the written supervision records do not always reflect this.

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