

Inspection of Trafford local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 21 November to 2 December 2022

Lead inspector: Nick Bennison, 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	Requires improvement to be good
Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement to be good

Following the last inspection in 2019, when Trafford was judged to be inadequate, the pace of improvement was too slow. This began to change with the establishment of a new senior leadership team in 2020, which increased its effort and focus to create stronger foundations to drive practice improvement. There has since been significant political and corporate support and commitment to the improvement of outcomes for children and young people in Trafford. This has included financial investment in children's services. The improvement board underpinned this change through the development of strong partnership working and challenge.

Senior leaders now have a more accurate self-assessment of the improvement work required. The 'front door' has been strengthened. The response to child exploitation is more robust. A relational model of social work practice, which is well regarded by the wider workforce, has been successfully implemented. This is moving the culture of the local authority from a focus on inspection outcomes and judgements to one which is more focused on children. This cultural shift has been underpinned by a strong training offer to support social workers to develop the skills they need to provide a better service to children. This has aided the strengthening of relationships across the partnership.

There is still too much variability in the quality of practice across children's services. In some areas, such as children with complex and additional needs and the out-of-hours service, children are still not receiving an effective service. Children who are

over 16 and homeless are not consistently being offered their entitlement to local authority accommodation. Social workers are not consistently receiving regular, good-quality supervision. The workforce challenges have been significant, but there is a relentless focus on reducing staff turnover and creating a more stable workforce. Staff morale is much improved as a result. Senior leaders have been proactive in responding to those issues identified during the inspection, such as improving the systems to monitor and track children on child protection plans.

What needs to improve

- The quality of out-of-hours service provision to offer a more comprehensive and timely service for children.
- The support for homeless children over 16.
- The support to children in care to help them understand their entitlements and how they can influence the shaping and developing of children's services.
- The use of direct work and life-story work to gain the voice of the child and to support children's understanding of their life history.
- The support for care leavers in preparing for their transition to independence.
- The quality and frequency of supervision.

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

1. Children's needs are identified promptly in the first response service at the front door. The co-location of police, health, education, and domestic abuse advisers is valued by partners, and enables timely information-sharing to support the screening of RAG-rated contact and referrals. Social workers take account of historical concerns when evaluating referral information. The voice of the child is well considered and risk analysis is sometimes written to the child, in order to maintain a focus on children's experiences. Social workers and first responders have a good understanding of a wide range of services, which can be built into support or safety plans. Thresholds are applied appropriately to ensure that there is a proportionate and effective response to risk.
2. Parental consent is appropriately considered and over-ridden where it is in the child's best interests to do so. Managers have oversight at key decision-making points, including at the daily demand meeting, which ensures a smooth transition of children from the first response teams into the families first teams. There is careful consideration of safety planning at this meeting to ensure that any immediate risk to the child is identified swiftly to inform appropriate action.
3. The need for early help services is promptly identified within the first response service, ensuring that families receive early support as difficulties emerge. Most child impact chronologies, early help assessments and plans are child-focused.

They clearly identify the impact of children's experiences and what needs to change. The management oversight of this service is robust and ensures progress is made. When children are stepped down from social care, careful consideration is given to the allocation of an early help worker to ensure that they are best placed to respond to the needs of the family. There is sensitive direct work undertaken by early help practitioners to support children and their families.

4. Strategy meetings are held promptly in response to risk of immediate harm, and partners work well with social workers to share information and agree next steps. The voice of the child is well considered at strategy meetings, providing a sense of what life is like for children. Children are often seen quickly when incidents occur. Although the written quality of s47 child protection enquiries is variable, the outcomes for children following these enquiries are appropriate and records provide a clear rationale for subsequent action.
5. Children's needs are not addressed swiftly out of office hours. The out-of-hours service is not sufficiently proactive in evaluating contact and referrals, which can lead to some delay in needs and risks being assessed by daytime services. There is sometimes too much reliance on a police welfare visit to assess crisis situations, without a social work assessment being completed to provide a clearer understanding of risk factors in the family. Senior leaders have acknowledged that this is an area which requires improvement and there is a review currently taking place to reshape the service.
6. The assessments undertaken by social workers provide a clear evaluation of strengths and risks surrounding the child. This is an area of improvement since the last inspection. The impact of family history on current family circumstances is well understood. The views of children are carefully considered and child impact chronologies are sometimes used effectively as a tool to understand the lived experiences of children. This leads to appropriate recommendations to inform future planning.
7. Most children benefit from child in need plans that are largely focused on what needs to happen to improve their circumstances, although actions are not routinely timebound. This means that timescales to achieve change are not always clear to families. Contingency planning is appropriately considered and, for some children, this leads to a proactive use of the wider family network to support the child. In the support and protect teams, the quality of child in need plans is more variable and plans do not always focus on and respond to the child's changing needs. Child in need review meetings are held regularly, with information and action shared between partners. This means that children's well-being and progress are supported through a multi-agency approach which is tailored to the child's individual needs.
8. Children are stepped up to child protection plans appropriately when risks escalate, or when their circumstances do not improve. Core groups are held regularly with key agencies and provide a helpful multi-agency update on

progress. However, the updated assessment of the child's needs following core group meetings is not robust, due to an over-reliance on completion of actions, rather than on the impact on children. As a result, the quality of child protection plans, is variable. A small number of children have been subject to child protection plans for too long. Interventions from social workers have not always been successful to enable families to bring about sustained change. Senior leaders have developed a pathway to ensure more rigorous management oversight of this group of children. This was adapted further during the inspection in response to feedback from inspectors.

9. The relational approach to social work practice is increasingly well-embedded across the service, although it has been impacted, until recently, by frequent changes of social worker. For example, social workers work well with parents to overcome resistance and challenge, using a relational approach. There is proactive use of safety plans by social workers, although these are undermined by a lack of written record or agreement with the family. There is an increasing amount of direct work with children. The quality of this work is variable but, in the stronger examples, the voice of the child is carefully considered.
10. There are now improved systems in place to track children in the pre-proceedings stage of the public law outline. When children are identified, legal gateway processes are followed promptly and letters before proceedings provide clear expectations for families to follow. However, arrangements to ensure children are progressed into pre-proceedings at the right time are underdeveloped, due to insufficient scrutiny of children on child protection plans. The absence of legal input into the pre-proceedings process can also cause delay for children. Despite these issues, for a small number of children, pre-proceedings work has been used to bring about positive change. The quality of evidence presented to the court is well-regarded by the local judiciary, who state that social workers know their children well.
11. Most children who have complex and additional needs are not receiving the right service at the right time. Some children experience drift and delay in the progression of their plans. This is due to frequent changes in social worker, lack of supervision, and, until recently, weaker social work practice. Some social workers have not been appropriately supported to develop the relevant skills to enable them to undertake direct work with children with additional needs. Senior leaders understand this and have developed an action plan in response, which has led to the establishment of a managed social work team of interim social workers. This team works within the management arrangements of the local authority. This ensures that senior managers retain oversight of the quality of work in this service. The team has been subject to significant staffing issues, but, more recently, the new team manager has secured a stronger management grip of practice.
12. There are very few children who have been identified as being placed in private fostering arrangements. When identified, assessments of carers and children are thorough and timely. Social workers and carers are clear as to the

appropriate exercising of parental responsibility. As a result, children's needs are well met and any risks addressed. Children are visited regularly by their allocated social worker to support these arrangements.

13. When children aged 16 and 17 present as homeless, the approach from the local authority is inconsistent. Young people are not always informed of their right to be accommodated by the local authority. While some young people are appropriately supported to return to family, others are not provided with sufficient support in recognition of the difficulties which led to their presenting as homeless. Senior leaders acknowledged during the inspection that this was an area for further improvement.
14. The child exploitation team 'SHINE' is a strength, due to the establishment of effective working relationships with key agencies who advocate for children who are hard to engage. This multidisciplinary team proactively supports children through a relational approach, which leads to the reduction of risk for some. Children continue to be monitored through multi-agency meetings after they are closed to the service. This means that the service can respond quickly if risks re-emerge. When children are missing from home, the missing-from-home team has direct access to several key agencies to support children. These close working relationships ensure that children receive targeted support quickly. However, return home interviews are not always timely and cannot be consistently seen to have an impact in reducing risk.
15. Families Focus is an effective edge of care service in Trafford which carries out welfare checks to support vulnerable children in the evening and at weekends. It undertakes skilled work with families, which empowers parents to develop workable strategies to defuse and reduce risks, in order to maintain children at home with their families.
16. There are a range of support services, both in-house and commissioned, particularly for domestic abuse. These are making a positive difference for many victims, perpetrators and children.
17. There is strong oversight of children who are missing from education. Senior leaders work well with other agencies to track, support, and challenge these children and their families. Parents who want their children to be home educated are well engaged with the local authority, which diligently assesses the suitability of these requests and acts accordingly. There is evidence of some positive work with parents to support and review their children's education at appropriate intervals. Consequently, while there has been an increase in the number of children being home educated in recent years linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, this increase is less than that seen nationally.
18. The local authority designated officer service in Trafford is proactive and effective in the management of allegations about adults who work with children.

The experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers: requires improvement to be good

19. Decisions for children to come into care are appropriate and timely. Most children make progress from the point of entering care and benefit from being placed with their siblings. Social workers give careful consideration to supporting children to have positive family time with significant family members.
20. Children in care have their physical and emotional health needs identified and well met. For some children, strengths and difficulties questionnaires are used in their personal education plans (PEPs) to identify areas of support for their emotional well-being. This multi-agency approach uses the PEP planning process to create a holistic support plan for the child in school. Children also have up-to-date health assessments and access to routine dental and optician appointments. Social workers help children access the emotional support they need, such as art therapy and child and adolescent mental health services support, when they experience trauma due to early childhood experiences. The health needs of children are prioritised early in these circumstances.
21. When children come into care, most remain at their school or nursery, which provides consistency to support learning. The virtual school is ambitious for children and has been effective in re-engaging children with education. Pupil premium plus funding is used well to support children in pursuing their hobbies and to build confidence. The PEPs do not always identify children's changing needs, which limits their impact on a child's lived experience in education.
22. Children in care in Trafford are supported by social workers who visit them regularly and seek to understand their lived experience. Visits are purposeful and when children have the opportunity to develop a trusting relationship with their social worker, this contributes effectively to assessments and plans for permanence. Too many children have experienced changes of social worker, which impacts on the quality and frequency of direct work completed. Life-story work is not consistently taking place to help children understand their life experiences.
23. Children's reviews are held regularly and are well attended by relevant agencies. The assessments of children in care are not routinely updated when children's circumstances change, which means that care plans do not always reflect the child's changing needs. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) maintain contact with children between reviews and write reviews to the child, which helps them understand their care plan. IROs offer stability and continuity for children, some of whom have experienced frequent changes of social worker. More recently, IROs have been offering appropriate scrutiny to ensure that plans are progressed in a timely way, and they increasingly escalate issues to prevent unnecessary delay.

24. Most children live in stable placements with carers who meet their needs well, and are making positive progress. When children are placed out of area, consideration is given to maintaining close links with friends and family in their home community. The majority of children are placed within a reasonable distance of Trafford. There are too many children waiting for their permanent placement to be confirmed. Although senior leaders have recently created a permanence tracker and permanence panel to oversee and progress permanence plans, it is too early for these changes to have had a significant impact on the quality of permanence planning for children.
25. There are too many children who have been living in placement with parent arrangements for too long. This has been recognised by the local authority. They have, through a targeted approach, significantly reduced the number of children living in these circumstances over the last 18 months, through the revocation of care orders. Despite these developments, there are still too many children who remain subject to unnecessary statutory intervention for longer than is necessary. IRO's have become more effective in tracking and escalating the plans for this cohort of children to avoid further drift and delay, but this has not always been the case. The IRO's have been positively supported by the local authority and are empowered as a group to challenge the pace and direction of planning for children.
26. The Children in Care Council (CiCC) is an established group of children who meet regularly. The children told inspectors that they are not consistently supported to understand their rights and entitlements as children in care. Children were unclear about some of their entitlements. They also had a limited understanding of how the CiCC aligns with the corporate parenting board, or of their ability to influence decision-making and shape service provision.
27. The recent redesign of fostering services in Trafford is beginning to positively impact on the recruitment of foster carers. It also offers appropriate support to children placed on court orders with family members. It is beginning to improve foster carers' engagement in post-approval training to ensure that they have the knowledge to offer effective care for children.
28. The number of children placed for adoption by the local authority is small. The effective relationship with the regional adoption agency (RAA), Adoption Counts, enables children to be placed with adoptive parents in a timely way. The feedback from the RAA to the local authority supports the development of social work practice. This is leading to improved report writing and to an improved quality of social work support for children placed for adoption.
29. Children over 16 years who are placed in unregulated supported accommodation are placed in suitably assessed and supported accommodation which meets their needs well.
30. A small number of children who are placed in unregistered children's homes are supported through increased social work visits and care planning meetings. The

decision-making to place children in these settings is evident on the child's record. Once placed, the systems in the local authority are not strong enough to ensure that senior managers continue to evidence their oversight of the child's progress in the provision.

31. Children in care with additional and complex needs, experience significant gaps in the quality of service they receive. Many of these children have not been visited at an appropriate frequency, and most of their care plans have not been updated for a significant time. This has led to drift in care arrangements for these children. Senior leaders have recognised this and have implemented an action plan with clear timescales to drive further improvement. A recently recruited agency team is beginning to take forward practice improvements to make a positive impact in this service area, but there is still much work to do to ensure a more consistent approach.
32. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are well cared for. They are placed with experienced foster carers who are sensitive to their needs, and advocate well for them. They are also placed in residential care where their needs are well met.
33. Care leavers have up-to-date pathway plans, although the quality of the detail in plans can vary. Pathway plans are not always informed by the active involvement of the young person. The actions sometimes lack detail and do not sufficiently reflect the level of work being undertaken by workers to improve young people's lives. After-care workers advocate for young people to ensure that they receive support in relation to identified needs. They place a strong emphasis on helping young people achieve their aspirations by accessing education, employment or training. Many care leavers are not allocated an after-care worker until close to the point of leaving care, which does not support a seamless transition into adulthood. Some young people experience too many changes of worker. This undermines their ability to develop a positive and trusting relationship with a key worker, at a point of significant change.
34. Young people are supported to stay put with their foster carers if this is the right plan for them. Care experienced young people live in suitable, safe accommodation. They receive the right levels of support that enable them to develop their independence skills. The 16+ panel is a valued forum to present and advocate for specific placements or additional resources for individual young people.
35. Most care-experienced young people's physical and emotional health needs are well understood and met. After-care workers help and support young people in engaging with health services. They also make early and appropriate referrals to appropriate services and support young people in their engagement with these services.
36. Young people are made aware of the local offer through direction to online information by their after-care worker. The detail of the offer is not always clear

and the young person's ability to understand their entitlements within the offer is too dependent on their relationship with their after-care worker.

37. When young care experienced people are in custody, the ability of the care leaving team to keep in touch with them is hindered by changes of after-care worker. For some young people, contact is maintained by a number of duty workers which, for young people with particularly complex needs, makes it harder to meaningfully engage and retain continuity.
38. Young people in post-16 education experience a mixed quality of support. Senior leaders have very recently taken steps to ensure that the needs of young people in care and care leavers are appropriately identified and shared with other professionals. However, care experienced young people are not currently included in this initiative. This means that some of these pupils are not getting the support they need to sustain education, employment, or training. As a result, the proportion of young people in care or who are care leavers who are not in education, employment or training remains too high in Trafford.
39. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking care leavers receive a variable service. For younger care leavers, there is a sensitive consideration of their religious and cultural needs by the local authority. For older care leavers, there is a lack of focus on ensuring their immigration status is settled by after-care workers.
40. The after-care forum is a highly effective group, which provides care leavers with a wide range of opportunities to develop their skills and interests. It also allows them to have a strong voice in advocating for children in care and care leavers. The forum is actively involved in recruitment and training of social workers, and hosts a range of awareness-raising events, such as the recent exploitation week. Some members of the forum have trained as mentors for younger children in care. However, the local authority does not ensure that all children in care and care leavers know about the forum.

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

41. Since the last inspection, senior leaders have created stronger foundations in practice to begin to support improvement. The cultural change in children's services in Trafford is tangible and there is now a much clearer focus on understanding the needs of children. This is evidenced in the language used by social workers and their managers when talking about children. This has been aided by the relational model of practice adopted by the local authority. Where this model is more strongly embedded, the quality of social work practice is stronger.
42. The local authority now knows its children's services well. The leader and lead member understand and challenge children's services and their work effectively. The chief executive has scrutinised all levels of the service to better

understand the issues, and to support the senior leadership team in progressing plans for improvement. There is now clear political and corporate support to the senior leadership team to further improve children's services.

43. The senior leadership team is more visible and accessible to the staff group. They have also developed forums such as the leadership and practitioner forums to gain the views of staff, and used these to develop improvement plans. There has also been development and use of a more accurate performance data set. This is scrutinised at all levels of the organisation to understand areas of strength and weakness. This work has resulted in an accurate self-evaluation of the service. Senior leaders have been open and transparent with inspectors about the remaining shortfalls in practice. This is a significant area of improvement since the last inspection.
44. There are specific areas in children's services where further support needs to be put in place as a priority, notably the service for children with complex and additional needs and the out-of-hours service. Children who remain looked after wait too long before they secure permanence. Recent initiatives to provide increased management oversight of this area of practice are a step in the right direction but are not always making sufficient impact. Some 16+ young people who become homeless are not receiving the right level of support from the local authority.
45. The quality assurance arrangements have been strengthened since the last inspection. The audit process is supporting the need for compliance from social workers through its focus on the completion of tasks. The process does not, however, routinely evaluate the quality of social work practice, or consistently involve the practitioner. It does not regularly gain feedback from children and parents. These are all missed opportunities to gain a greater depth of information about the impact of front-line services and learning to drive service improvements. Senior leaders acknowledged this during the inspection.
46. The senior leadership team has developed and strengthened relationships with partner agencies. This has meant that partners such as schools, police, health, and the voluntary sector have, since the last inspection, become much more engaged in safeguarding children and developing a joint approach to supporting vulnerable children in Trafford.
47. There is a strong corporate parenting strategy in place, with clear ambitions. The corporate parenting board is embedded and has clear oversight of practice and areas for development for children looked after in Trafford. There is corporate support through regular attendance of senior leaders from across the council services. Young people and children are involved in the development of services, although this participation could be strengthened to ensure a much more coherent approach to involving them in shaping children's services.
48. The learning offer has been strengthened and social workers, including interim staff, benefit from a wide range of training. There has been a significant

investment by the local authority to commission training to support social workers in their practice. There has been a training focus on developing the skills of leaders across all of children's services. There has also been an imaginative range of peer and group supervision, which aids social workers in progressing their learning and development.

49. There is a comprehensive workforce development plan and recruitment strategy in place. This is beginning to have some impact on workforce stability, as the high turnover of staff in Trafford is beginning to reduce. The social workers in Trafford are overwhelmingly positive about both the local authority and the support they receive. However, staff turnover has impacted on the quality of the service that has been offered to children. There are also some parts of the service, such as the children with complex and additional needs team, which are still fragile and reliant on interim staff.
50. There is improvement in the quality of social work in Trafford. However, children in the local authority still experience too much inconsistency in the service that they receive. This situation is exacerbated by the variable frequency and quality of supervision for social workers from their team managers. Despite the relaunch of the supervision policy earlier this year, this is still an area for development.

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