

Inspection of Stockton-on-Tees local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 6 to 17 March 2023

Lead inspector: Joanna Warburton, 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	Requires improvement to be good
The experiences and progress of care leavers	Requires improvement to be good
Overall effectiveness	Requires improvement to be good

Children in need of help, protection and care in Stockton-on-Tees do not yet receive good enough services. The senior leadership team has begun to address the areas for priority action identified at the recent focused visit in September 2022. Senior leaders have made improvements to the 'front door' arrangements and to multi-agency partnerships and have begun to address weakness in the quality of assessments and decision-making. Since the last judgement inspection, in May 2019, significant improvements can be evidenced in the response to kinship care, including special guardianship and Public Law Outline (PLO) practice.

Senior leaders recognised prior to this inspection that they still have more work to do to improve the experiences of children and their families and care leavers. This particularly relates to managers improving the quality of assessments, and helping social workers to understand cumulative risk and develop effective intervention plans. Frontline managers are not all providing social workers with good enough supervision or challenge, or supporting them to reflect, to help inform their practice.

Senior leaders acknowledge that the pace of change has been too slow in relation to improving the fostering service and improving the offer to care leavers. New and permanent senior leaders, and frontline managers, are helping to implement the local authority's plans for improvement, which are already underway and beginning to develop traction.

What needs to improve?

- The quality and effectiveness of plans for children and care leavers, including safety plans agreed with parents.
- Sufficiency of suitable foster homes for children.
- Frontline management oversight across the service, in relation to the quality of assessment and plans and the impact of interventions.
- Opportunities for more children and care leavers to have a voice and to influence the development of services.

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

1. Children who need early help receive a timely response when the intervention is from within the local authority's own service. When workers refer children's cases out to partner agencies or commissioned services following an early help assessment, some children and their families can wait several weeks before receiving support. Currently, there is no system in place for senior managers within the local authority to monitor these waiting lists because children's cases are closed once they are referred on to the alternative early help services. Similarly, there is no system to evaluate the effectiveness of these services or understand what difference they make to children's lives.
2. Stockton-on-Tees children's services commissions its contact and referral functions from a neighbouring local authority. The service is known as The Children's Hub (CHUB). Contacts into the CHUB are responded to in a timely way. Relevant information about children and their families is captured and analysed. Risks are properly understood, and the right decisions are made for children. Thresholds to access statutory services are well understood and applied. Management oversight in this part of the service is timely and robust.
3. Staff in children's services have the appropriate knowledge and skills necessary to understand domestic violence and abuse, and they work effectively with other agencies in protecting children from harm. When a child is suspected, or likely, to be suffering significant harm, strategy meetings are timely and involve the relevant partners. Resultant child protection enquiries and investigations are thorough, and decision-making to safeguard children is appropriate, clearly recorded and leads to timely and proportionate protective actions. The emergency duty team's response to concerns out of hours is both timely and proportionate. This includes the completion of child protection enquiries, including strategy discussions. Safeguarding actions are undertaken as required and information is passed to daytime services promptly.
4. The local authority designated officer (LADO) responds promptly and effectively when there are concerns about the behaviour of an adult who works with

children. The LADO is proactive in ensuring that their role and their function are known and understood across the multi-agency partnership and voluntary sector.

5. Assessment quality has been improving since the September 2022 focused visit. There is increased evidence of children being seen during their assessments and of social workers capturing children's voices. Immediate risk and harm are swiftly identified. While historical information about children and their families is better gathered, this information is not always fully analysed to understand the context in which children are living, or parental capacity to change.
6. Some children's cases are stepped down prematurely to early help following assessment when families have not engaged with services to reduce risk. Social workers do not always identify within assessments the risks that children face or their needs thoroughly enough. There is also a lack of scrutiny of assessment outcomes or challenge from frontline managers to social workers when children's cases are closed or stepped down to early help. This leads to some children being re-referred into children's social care for the same reasons.
7. There are weaknesses in how child-in-need and child protection plans are developed. Many children's plans are not specific enough in identifying what support is to be provided, by whom, by when and why. While social workers prioritise building positive relationships with parents, in some instances, they rely too heavily on safety plans that place unrealistic expectations on parents' actual capacity to change. Many plans also lack timescales for change to be achieved and lack safe contingencies. Multi-agency meetings to review children's plans take place regularly and involve relevant partners. However, the effectiveness of these meetings to improve the child's circumstances is limited due to care planning weaknesses and, in some cases, low parental engagement.
8. Most children's cases are escalated into pre-proceedings under the PLO when managers identify that their circumstances are not improving. There is some inconsistency in how social workers advise parents to make improvements to their parenting and in what is required of them before care proceedings are issued. Since the previous judgement inspection, legal planning meetings have improved significantly and are now chaired effectively, and children's progress is tracked by senior managers. These meetings inform the decision about whether to issue proceedings, move the child's case into formal pre-proceedings or continue working with the family under a child-in-need or child protection plan. As a result, children's cases are only taken to court when it is necessary and proportionate to do so.
9. Social workers are sensitive to the needs of disabled children. They routinely engage with children and their families to gather their views. This leads to most children being supported by thorough planning that takes account of their changing needs and those of their families.

10. Children at risk of exploitation receive a well-coordinated response from within children's social care, and from across the multi-agency child exploitation (MACE) safeguarding partnership. Multi-agency risk assessments are reviewed by safeguarding partners sitting within MACE on a regular basis. This ensures that information is current and informs wider risk-management plans, which, for most children, reduces their level of risk and informs disruption activity.
11. The response when children go missing from home is well managed. There is a tenacious approach to ensuring that return home interviews are completed. Staff are persistent in their attempts to talk with children or, if children do not want to engage, their family and carers are consulted. This helps social workers to understand risks for individual children.
12. Local authority staff and school leaders closely track children when they are missing education and they work effectively to ensure that children who are not attending school are returned to a school roll as soon as possible. Local authority staff also share information with partner agencies effectively to monitor children who are electively home-educated.
13. Children aged 16 to 17 years old who are homeless, or threatened with homelessness, are promptly identified as vulnerable. Assessments of need are sensitively undertaken, along with supported efforts to rehabilitate children with their families where it is safe to do so. Children receive a well-coordinated response from housing and children's social care. When children are not able to remain within their family, they are accommodated where appropriate.
14. Children who are living in private fostering arrangements are identified. For most children, the assessments of potential carers and the child are timely and thorough. These placements are reviewed by children's social workers to ensure that arrangements remain safe and appropriate.

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

15. Most children enter care at the time that is right for them. In making decisions about where children should live and how they will be cared for, social workers consider all options for children to remain living safely within their extended family and friends' network. Since the last judgement inspection, there has been a significant improvement in the approach to assessing the strengths and weaknesses of prospective placements with family and friends and in identifying what assistance families might need to provide a safe and effective long-term home for a child.
16. While most children's cases are now escalated more quickly into the PLO process, for a small number of children, the decision to issue care proceedings is subject to some delay. Social workers supporting children and their families in the context of care proceedings do not consistently undertake assessments to inform whether brothers and sisters should be placed together. When care

proceedings are issued, the quality of care applications, supporting evidence and care planning is child-focused and mostly considers all permanence options. The designated family judge and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) confirm that social workers present appropriate recommendations to the court and are well supported by their managers.

17. There is not a sufficiently wide range and choice of placements to meet the individual needs of all children in care. A small number of children are living in unregistered children's homes for short periods of time due to a lack of suitable homes that meet their specific needs. Senior leaders are acutely aware of the nature of these placements and seek, wherever possible, to avoid using unregistered providers. On the small number of occasions when this is unavoidable, social workers, managers and senior leaders have close oversight of the care children receive during this period and until they can move children to suitable regulated care.
18. A lack of targeted recruitment of foster carers means that there are too few foster carers to meet demand. Foster to adopt recruitment is underdeveloped. During the recruitment process, assessments of mainstream prospective foster carers are thorough, and the approval process is completed to a high standard to allow the agency decision-maker to make appropriate decisions related to the care of children. Foster carers report that they value the training offer. They report that this gives them greater insight and knowledge and supports them in their role caring for children with a wide range of needs. However, there is a gap in training for foster carers of teenage children regarding contextual safeguarding. Foster carers report that support groups are held infrequently, which means they are not benefiting from opportunities to meet with other foster carers for support and shared learning.
19. Permanence through adoption is considered in a timely way for children when they enter care. Adopters speak positively about the assessment process and the quality of support, including the adoption support plans, they receive from the regional adoption agency, Adoption Tees Valley. There is a strong relationship between the regional adoption agency and the local authority, and this ensures that there is good oversight of children who need adoption through the early notification process. This allows time for prospective adopters to be considered and reduces delay for children. Introductions are well managed. Adopters report that they felt involved in the planning for the child and found professionals responsive to the needs of their own families as well as those of their adopted child. When children are adopted, later life letters and life story books are detailed and carefully worded so that children can understand why important decisions were made about their lives.
20. Social workers visit children living in residential care regularly, even when the child is placed at a distance. Most children live in placements that meet their needs and receive good-quality care. Senior leaders recognise the challenges of providing good-quality local placements for children with more complex needs.

A new build strategy is currently underway, which has been championed and driven by senior leaders and the chief executive officer. Disabled children in care receive appropriate multi-agency support in line with their care plan and education, health and care plan. Social workers engage in early discussion with adult services so that timely plans for children transitioning are made.

21. Social workers and leaders make appropriate decisions when children move out of area so that they can live in a placement or with a family member and have their individual needs met. Social workers appropriately liaise with the local authority to inform them that the child lives in their area.
22. Most children in long-term care are benefiting from living with carers who provide stability and consistent, nurturing care. Children form positive attachments with their carers. These placements are acknowledged and treated as long-term and sometimes described as permanent but there is inconsistency in using the formal procedure to ratify these placements through fostering panel arrangements. This means that children are left with uncertainty about their futures. Children who live in care alternative to adoption do not consistently benefit from life story books to help them understand their life history. Children are not always helped to understand their experiences living with their birth families and in care.
23. Most children leave care appropriately and in a planned way. Where the plan is for special guardianship, the assessments and resulting support plans mean that children can remain living permanently within their family network. Special guardians receive financial support in line with fostering allowances. When children are placed at home with their parents, assessments are thorough, with full consideration of children's wishes and established support plans. Children's plans are regularly reviewed to ensure that they remain safe and continue to make progress.
24. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are well cared for. Their care, identity and religious needs are understood and supported sensitively by their carers and social workers. Children are quickly linked into local social activities to support their integration into the community. They are helped to become involved in leisure activities that they enjoy and are supported to access bespoke education and training.
25. Independent reviewing officers (IROs) ensure that they gather most children's wishes and feelings prior to their reviews. Some children in care do not have focused or timebound plans. When IROs do challenge social workers or managers about the quality of children's plans, or about a matter of drift or delay, there is limited evidence of how the matter has been resolved for the child or that the social work practice has been considered. Children, including unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, are offered support through independent advocacy to ensure that their views are considered as part of their review.

26. Most children's physical and mental health needs are quickly assessed when they come into care. A recently established multi-agency panel sits alongside the child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). It provides consultation for social workers who are worried about the emotional well-being of children in care. Therapeutic practitioners work directly with children and their carers to identify strategies to reduce risk of self-harm and improve emotional regulation. When there are escalating concerns about a child's mental health, they are appropriately referred to CAMHS.
27. Social workers are very alert to risks of exploitation. When children go missing from care, social workers ensure that return home interviews are completed. Information gained through these interviews allows for accurate assessment of risk and the development of a plan to manage and reduce risk levels.
28. The participation offer for children in care in Stockton-on-Tees is underdeveloped. Currently, too few children can engage in activities with other children in care. Children do not have the opportunity to consult with senior leaders or the corporate parenting panel to influence and develop service delivery.
29. Leaders in the virtual school are ambitious for children in care and the progress that they should make. Staff work closely with designated teachers in each school to agree strategies for children, such as English tutoring or additional careers guidance. Children in care achieve well at the end of key stage 4 and are well prepared for the next stage of their education or training. Leaders recognise that the attendance of some children in care needs to improve.

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

30. Most personal advisers (PAs) provide purposeful support alongside social workers, which helps children in care to transition successfully into adulthood and greater independence. Many care leavers develop strong and positive relationships with their PAs, who are committed to promoting their welfare and provide purposeful practical and emotional support. Most care leavers speak very positively about their PAs and feel listened to.
31. Senior leaders have recently restructured the care leavers' service. It is now located within targeted youth support. As a result, PAs are dual working across both service areas. This dilutes the time that they have available for care leavers. The restructuring of this team and its roles, while well intended, means that some PAs do not currently have sufficient experience in working with care leavers. For example, some PAs had not fully explained entitlements available for care leavers who are attending university. Therefore, the quality and effectiveness of support provided by PAs to care leavers are inconsistent.
32. Care leavers' pathway plans do not identify and plan for their futures well enough. Pathway plans are not quality-assured by a manager. Therefore, there

is no oversight to address weaknesses in the plans or understanding of the consistency and quality of planned support. In addition, reviews of the pathway plans are rarely completed with the care leaver. Care leavers do not therefore routinely contribute to decision-making or jointly explore alternative support when their needs are not being adequately met.

33. Despite the weaknesses in pathway plans, most PAs are mindful of care leavers' individual circumstances and provide good levels of support. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who become care leavers are helped with their asylum claims and provided with accommodation that mainly meets their needs. They are helped to access education and training and are provided with opportunities to pursue recreational and religious interests. Care leavers who become parents are mostly well supported.
34. Care leavers who find themselves in custody are supported following release but are not always visited regularly while in custody. For care leavers, this disrupts their relationship with their PA, which means that, when they are released from custody, they do not have an enduring relationship with a trusted adult.
35. Most care leavers are supported by their PAs to maintain relationships with their friends and family, and this enables them to return to live with family when this is the right decision for them. There is a good range of accommodation available for care leavers and most are living in homes that meet their needs. For a few, there are avoidable delays in accessing the right accommodation in the right location, which impacts on them accessing education. A small number of care leavers are not currently living in suitable accommodation.
36. Care leavers are not routinely provided with their health histories. They are not, therefore, always provided with effective support to manage their own health needs and access health services.
37. Leaders have improved the offer for post-16 children in care and have provided additional capacity in the form of progression advisers, who support children in care and care leavers through education transitions. A sizeable number of care leavers are well supported to progress to higher education. Senior leaders have developed a scheme to provide a small number of appropriate apprenticeships for care leavers within the council.
38. The care leaver offer is not well publicised by the local authority. This means that care leavers are very dependent on their PA informing them of their rights and entitlements. Most, but not all, PAs promote effective use of the care leaver offer.
39. A small but exceptionally talented and committed group of care leavers participates in work to design and improve care leavers' services in Stockton-on-Tees. The group feels valued and well supported. However, its suggestions

for improving the care leaver offer have not yet been implemented. The response by leaders to the group's ideas has been too slow.

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

40. The director of children's services and his senior leadership team understand and prioritise the needs of children in Stockton-on-Tees. The self-evaluation broadly aligns to what inspectors have found. This demonstrates that senior leaders know their service well. They understand their strengths, and what needs to improve. They have developed relevant service improvement plans, and their implementation is ongoing. They welcome and invite external scrutiny through peer review to aid their learning about service quality.
41. Areas for priority action that were issued following the focused visit in September 2022 have begun to be addressed. Leaders have been proactive in securing an additional short-term resource, which has reduced the waiting list so that children are now allocated a social worker as soon as they are referred into the response and assessment service. There has been a significant amount of investment in social work training to improve the quality of children's assessments. While improvements are in evidence, there remains weakness in the final analysis and recommendations. Senior leaders recognised this prior to the inspection as a further area for improvement and have already taken steps to deliver further training to social workers and frontline managers.
42. The quality-assurance programme is comprehensive and is used by senior leaders to drive improvement and help them understand the quality of social work practice. The audit programme is regular, but the quality of case file audits by managers is not yet consistent or helping senior managers to gain a good enough understanding of management decision-making or children's experiences. Performance management and monitoring systems mostly provide senior leaders with an accurate understanding of the effectiveness and timeliness of work. Senior leaders are less sighted on the experiences of children and their families who receive early help interventions from commissioned services.
43. The chief executive officer and lead member are well informed about the local and national challenges for children's social care. They have been influential in further improving communication between the council and other political members to secure financial support to help senior leaders implement improvements. This includes investment to increase in-house residential provision and the establishment of a hub for care leavers, which is about to be created. There is improved scrutiny of the practice of senior leaders, who are now better held to account since the last focused visit. Strategic partnerships have been strengthened. The courts and Cafcass now have increasing confidence in the practice and decisions made for children subject to care proceedings and PLO. Partners spoken to during the inspection demonstrate commitment to working together to improve outcomes for children.

44. There is weakness in corporate parenting arrangements. The corporate parenting strategy and resultant action plans lack a sense of urgency, particularly in relation to developing the fostering service, and promoting the voice and influence of children and their families and care leavers in service improvement and development. Children in care and care leavers need more opportunities to participate in events together or with leaders and managers to share their respective and collective views or celebrate their achievements and progress.
45. Frontline management across the service does not challenge social workers well enough to reflect on their practice and, most importantly, reflect on the impact of their interventions into children's lives. This weakness is mirrored in the IRO service, where there is an absence of impact and learning from children's reviews when there is drift and delay in children's plans progressing and decision-making.
46. Stockton-on-Tees, like other local authorities nationally, is challenged by the recruitment and retention of social workers. Arrangements to mitigate caseload pressures by allocating children's cases to some team managers is understandable but is not sustainable. There is currently a recruitment campaign, including a small number of social work apprenticeships, and a market supplement increase to support the recruitment and retention of social workers. Although vacant posts are being filled, it is too soon to see the impact on workloads for social workers and the benefit for children receiving a service.
47. Workers enjoy working in Stockton-on-Tees. Senior leaders are visible to staff and staff report that leaders and managers are approachable and supportive. Managers, particularly those who are new in post, state that they feel listened to by senior leaders. Children's services has a comprehensive range of in-house, regional and service area training, which is valued by staff.



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