

Inspection of South Tyneside local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 5 to 9 December 2022 and 14 to 15 February 2023

Lead inspector: Rebecca Quested, His Majesty's Inspector

Judgement	Grade
The impact of leaders on social work practice with children and families	Inadequate
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	Inadequate
Overall effectiveness	Inadequate

There has been a decline in the quality of services for children in South Tyneside Council since its last inspection, when services were judged to be good. Although there have been improvements in some discrete areas, there are serious failures which have resulted in some children's welfare not being safeguarded or promoted. The local authority's senior and political leadership has undergone substantial change since the last inspection in 2017, with a new chief executive and lead council member being appointed in 2021. The director of children's services and assistant director were initially appointed in an interim capacity from within children's services in 2020 and confirmed in their substantive posts in 2021. Since 2017, there has been a deterioration in the strategic oversight and understanding of how social work practice has affected children's experiences. This has meant that leaders have not focused on what needs to improve swiftly or robustly enough, which has resulted in increased workloads and an over-reliance on newly qualified social workers.

There is a lack of coherent management oversight of social work practice across a significant proportion of children's services. This is especially evident at the 'front door' and for those children in care who are living in unregistered children's homes,

or with connected carers, and children who have been reunited with their parents. A lack of strategic planning has led to significant numbers of children being placed in unregistered children's homes which are not meeting children's often-complex needs. These vulnerable children are not safeguarded effectively. The chief executive and political leaders took timely and decisive action to address emerging findings during the inspection in December 2022.

Despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and the complexities of senior leadership change, there has been progress in a few areas since the previous inspection. In particular, there is an improved response to children who are missing from care or at risk of exploitation, and there are improvements to the quality of children's plans, children's participation and the quality of supervision in the leaving care team.

What needs to improve?

- Management recording of decision-making rationale throughout the service, including the timeliness and efficacy of senior leaders' written oversight of children's plans in order to reflect live decision-making.
- The local authority's effectiveness in ensuring that there are enough suitable regulated homes for children who cannot live with their birth families.
- The effectiveness of performance management and quality management.
- Partner agencies' understanding and application of the threshold guidance for making referrals to the local authority about children who may be in need or at risk of harm. In particular, this refers to the police.
- The timeliness of assessments.
- How quickly the local authority finds and agrees permanent homes for children and how effectively independent reviewing officers scrutinise and challenge both this process and wider planning for children.
- The timeliness and quality of direct work with children, including life-story work.

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

1. The early help service is developing the principles of the Supporting Families Programme in South Tyneside. However, this is not yet embedded. When a service is provided, there are detailed and effective early help assessments which identify specific support for children and families. Well-attended Team Around the Family meetings monitor progress effectively through timebound actions.
2. The integrated safeguarding and intervention team (ISIT) at the front door is undergoing significant changes, including bringing some early help workers into the service. However, the changes that are being made compound a complex and confusing pathway for contacts and referrals about children. When there is

insufficient information about contacts to understand children's needs, a referral is created within 24 hours. This ensures that there is not a delay in progressing children's cases for an assessment of their needs. However, this practice does mean that some children are being subjected to a referral to children's social care when consent from the parents or carers has not always been sought or provided. Management oversight is not consistently present and, when recorded, is not always timely and does not always contain a clear rationale for decision-making. The quality of information in contacts made by partner agencies is mostly weak. Therefore, considerable time is required to understand children's situations and to establish whether there are any safeguarding concerns.

3. Domestic abuse contacts are triaged daily with police colleagues within the front door. Due to weaknesses in decision-making, and too many contacts being accepted as referrals, the high volume of contacts received from the police has elevated demand for statutory services. Managers have identified appropriately that a large-scale change of the service is required regarding relevant decision-making and application of thresholds, safety planning, the use of the DASH (domestic abuse, stalking and honour-based violence) assessment tool, referral to MARAC (multi-agency risk assessment conference), and the pathways for domestic abuse concerns. Responses to address these issues have been too slow.
4. Child protection strategy meetings are routinely well attended but records of these critical meetings are poor and lack evaluation. The subsequent child protection enquiries are undertaken in a timely way and are well conducted. Most children are seen promptly and are spoken to as part of these enquiries. There is appropriate management decision-making about whether to progress to an initial child protection conference or to other services at a lower level of intervention.
5. Assessments of children's needs are not consistently completed within the right timescale for the child, with delays in their completion for a significant number of children. Support and intervention are not provided to children and their families during the assessment process, so some children are waiting too long to have their needs met.
6. Most social workers get to know children well. However, purposeful direct work is not always routinely undertaken by social workers in order to help them to gain a deeper insight into the child's world, and for some, they do not always consider the impact of significant events on children's experiences.
7. Not all children who are neglected are identified consistently or effectively. This is compounded by a lack of chronologies of significant events to help social workers to understand the pattern of concerns. Consequently, there is a lack of a systematic approach to the identification of neglect, which means that some children are left in neglectful situations for too long.

8. Chairs of child protection conferences actively engage families in the child protection process. Most child protection and child-in-need plans are clear and accessible to children, parents and other professionals. Plans include a range of interventions that lead to the provision of proportionate and specific support to children and families, including disabled children. Some children benefit from plans that are skilfully written to them. Plans are reviewed regularly by the core group of professionals in the child's network. This ensures that their progress is kept in focus and continually assessed. However, contingency plans are not always individualised to the child's circumstances or sufficiently clear, so that parents understand what would happen should progress not be made.
9. Once children have a child-in-need or a child protection plan in place, they are visited at a frequency that meets their needs. Some social workers complete direct work with children in the development of their 'my plan', which children are involved in writing. For these children, it means that their wishes and feelings are used to inform planning. Although records are written to the child, the language used is not consistently child-friendly, which lessens their value to them.
10. Family group conferences are available for some families but are not fully embedded into social work practice. However, social workers do explore how family and friends can support children to remain safely living within their families. Some children benefit from the flexible and effective edge of care service, Families First, which is a mixture of outreach support and short breaks to ensure that children can remain living within their families.
11. When plans are not effective in improving children's experiences, there is usually timely escalation to the pre-proceedings stage of the public law outline (PLO). Effective tracking prevents drift and provides an additional layer of oversight and scrutiny for these vulnerable children, and some children do step down out of PLO. The quality of letters before proceedings is inconsistent. They are not always clear about the expectations of parents or about what needs to change, and the language used can appear to blame children for their own situations.
12. When 16- and 17-year-old children present as homeless, they are routinely provided with an assessment of their needs, and some children do become looked after. It is not explicitly recorded that children have been advised about their rights to become looked after and the benefits that this would bring.
13. The out of hours service provides a responsive and seamless service with an effective handover to daytime colleagues.
14. There is robust and prompt oversight within ISIT when children go missing or are at risk of exploitation. Children receive timely return home interviews. Information from these is used effectively, to inform children's risk assessments and undertake disruption activity to reduce risks.

15. Staff in the school attendance team ensure that any children who are missing education or who are electively home educated are located and closely monitored. However, the recording is not sufficiently linked with information from other services, and this can delay some actions that are needed.

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

16. Despite the positive experiences of many children in care, the judgement for experiences and progress of children in care and care leavers is inadequate. This is because of the serious shortfalls in the experiences of children who are living in homes that do not meet their needs and that are operating without sufficient management oversight. The welfare of these children is not being safeguarded and promoted.
17. Most children come into care at a time that is right for them. However, children are not always placed with appropriately assessed and registered carers. Some children are placed in unregistered children's homes created by the leadership team, in what are called locally 'staffed houses'. These are rented houses staffed on an ad-hoc basis by social workers, foster carers and children's home staff who are employed by South Tyneside to work in other roles or settings. Children in these settings have poor experiences and outcomes as staffing is inconsistent and most staff lack the training and skills to meet their individual needs or manage their behaviour effectively.
18. Children living in these 'staffed houses' have not had their basic needs for consistent care met. Nor have they had their education, physical and emotional health needs met. The most vulnerable children in the care of the authority have not been appropriately safeguarded and there has been inadequate oversight of children living in 'staffed houses' due to insufficient social work visits and management or senior leadership review. A small but significant number of children, including young children who have just become looked after, as well as some children who have complex needs, have experienced this very poor care in recent months. There has been insufficient challenge within the local authority to what has become established practice.
19. Some children are placed with family or friends when these adults have not been thoroughly assessed or approved. There have been delays in 'placement with parents' assessments being completed or authorised by senior managers for most looked after children who return to the care of their parents. This means that, as a corporate parent, South Tyneside has not assured itself that these children's living arrangements are safe and are meeting children's needs.
20. Some children in care experience high numbers of placement moves alongside numerous changes of social worker, undermining their sense of stability and ability to develop trusting relationships. Once children are in their permanent homes, they start to make good progress.

21. Most disabled children receive effective support and planning, which means they live with carefully selected and committed carers. Comprehensive and bespoke support is provided for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children which meets their individual cultural needs.
22. Most children are seen regularly by their social workers. Case records do not demonstrate consistently that social work visits are purposeful or that direct work is routinely completed with children. Some social workers record statutory visits as taking place when they have care of children in 'staffed houses'. This does not provide children with the level of independent scrutiny or oversight required of their care. A renewed emphasis on creative life-story work supports placement stability for some children, but there is a delay in providing this support for all children who need it.
23. There is a clear vision for the fostering service. However, there are currently not enough carers to meet the number of cared for children. For most carers, there is a good package of support, supervision and training in place. The Mockingbird constellations, where a group of foster carers are supported by an experienced foster carer, are a service strength, with children and foster carers benefiting from the nurture and support that the programme brings. There is a lack of management oversight and scrutiny in key areas across the service, including ensuring that connected carers benefit from the same support and training that other foster carers do.
24. South Tyneside is part of a regional adoption agency (Adopt North East), which is meeting the needs of children with a plan for adoption. The quality of the recruitment, assessment and support of adopters is good. However, the demanding workloads of children's social workers are having a negative impact on the support and communication offered to adopters. There is a significant backlog with life-story work and later life letters, resulting in children being placed for adoption without having these in place.
25. Permanence tracking of children with a plan for adoption is effective. However, there is no equivalent management tracking of permanence for all children in care. This means that there is insufficient oversight and grip on children's progress in securing permanence. Positively, more children are now having their long-term permanence secured through special guardianship orders when this is appropriate to their needs.
26. Most children's care plans reflect changes in children's lives and are regularly reviewed. For the majority of children, their plans set out the way in which their health and educational needs will be met. Family time is promoted when it is in children's best interests. Most children's health assessments are timely, although accessing mental health services is sometimes difficult, which leads to delays in children receiving the right support.
27. Staff at the virtual school are relentless in pursuing positive education outcomes for most children in care. However, this was not evident for the small number of children living in unregistered children's homes. Children in care

mostly have high attendance and they are well supported to have positive attitudes to education. Children with SEND are quickly identified and assessed by the virtual school. When children need additional or specialist support, staff locate and provide this swiftly.

28. Reviews are held regularly, and children are encouraged to participate in their meetings in order to share their views. Independent reviewing officers have not been effective in challenging the use of unsuitable living arrangements for some children or in using the dispute resolution process.
29. Social workers are alert to the risk of extra-familial harm when children go missing from care. Children are swiftly offered return home interviews, which are used skilfully to inform risk assessments and reduce the future likelihood of harm.
30. Some children take part in a range of participation activities and contribute to the development of services. Children who inspectors met said that they know how to contact their social workers to raise concerns or complain. Those children who are involved value the support they receive from the participation team and the range of opportunities that they have to come together, for example through the Making a Great Important Change (MAGIC) groups and the Care Leavers Council.
31. Care leavers benefit from the timely allocation to their personal adviser (PA) when they are 16 years old, which gives them time to build a meaningful relationship. Most care leavers are well prepared for adulthood at a pace appropriate to their individual needs, including gaining support from adult services where appropriate. Care leavers are well supported by their PAs until they reach 25, with an opt-out approach adopted. Consequently, most care leavers in South Tyneside are in regular contact with their PAs.
32. Care leavers benefit from long-standing relationships with PAs who know them extremely well and are aspirational for them. When care leavers are parents, PAs sensitively support them, drawing on a comprehensive array of services to meet their needs.
33. A generous local offer is provided to care leavers in South Tyneside, which young people know how to access. Care leavers' health is promoted. They benefit from dedicated mental health support and sexual health support. Informative health histories are provided to care leavers when they are 18 years old.
34. Many care leavers are central to the process of crafting their pathway plans. Plans provide clear and user-friendly identification of needs and set out how these will be met. When there are ongoing safeguarding concerns for care leavers, the local authority's team for children at risk of going missing, slavery, exploitation and trafficking (MSET) continues to oversee the children's and young people's plans and risk assessments, irrespective of their age, and informs the multi-agency support and management of risk.

35. The majority of care leavers live in suitable accommodation. A high number of care leavers stay put with their foster carers, which means that they are supported by adults with whom they have a trusting relationship.
36. Care leavers who are not accessing education, employment or training are carefully monitored. Effective relationships with employers provide care leavers with enhanced employment opportunities.

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

37. There has been a significant overall decline in the effectiveness of social work practice with children and families in South Tyneside. Service leaders have been ineffective in both identifying and addressing the causes of this decline.
38. Senior leaders have not responded swiftly or assertively enough to challenges, such as the increase in demand for services. This has led to increasing pressure in the front door and subsequently in completing assessments. There has been an inappropriate response by senior leaders to issues of placement sufficiency for children in care. Senior leaders have not ensured that effective management oversight is in place across all service areas, and this has had a negative impact on the quality of frontline social work practice and on children's experiences.
39. Since the last inspection, there has been a change in the senior leadership of South Tyneside Council, with a new chief executive, leader of the council and children's lead member. The director of children's services and assistant director were promoted from within children services in 2020 and confirmed in their substantive posts in 2021. Following the inspection findings being shared with the chief executive and council leaders, decisive action has been taken to begin to address these shortfalls.
40. Leaders have positive and effective relationships with most partner agencies. However, the relationship with the police is not strong enough to ensure that there is a shared understanding of children's services thresholds. This has led to a high volume of police referrals. Over the last six months, the front door has been under considerable pressure and changes were made to the operation of the service on the day inspectors arrived in South Tyneside.
41. There are too few suitable placements for children in care. While there are medium- and long-term plans in place to address this, the decision to develop unregistered children's homes to care for children poses significant safeguarding concerns. Over the last six months, a significant number of young children have been living in these unregistered children's homes for many weeks or, sometimes, months, where their needs are not being met. Other children are also living with unapproved connected carers. Decisions about where children live are made without clear and recorded management oversight, particularly for those children placed in unregistered children's homes and with unassessed connected carers and parents. Senior leaders have

not monitored or reviewed the care of these children effectively in order to ensure that the children's welfare is being safeguarded and promoted. Despite reassurances given to inspectors by the DCS and her team that there was robust and effective oversight of these decisions, the evidence gained through this inspection highlighted a lack of rigour, internal governance and risk assessment as part of management case recording. These findings have been promptly and robustly addressed by the chief executive and council leaders following being alerted to the issues by inspectors. At the conclusion of this inspection, improving management practice was found.

42. Performance management systems are in place, but they are not consistently or well used to ensure that social work practice is safeguarding children and meeting their needs. In particular, leaders and managers have not used the information effectively to respond to the increased demand at the front door or to ensure that children receive an assessment of their needs in a timely way.
43. Quality assurance arrangements, including audits, are not effective in ensuring that children's individual circumstances improve. Nor is there identification of thematic issues. There is no effective 'close the loop' process so that audits, which in themselves are helping to identify issues, have an impact on outcomes for children.
44. Leaders have recognised appropriately that more social workers are needed to meet the needs of children, especially in the front door and assessment teams. This has been challenging and there has been a reliance on newly qualified social workers to undertake complex work with high workloads.
45. Despite experiencing increasing workloads over the last six months, passionate and committed social workers report feeling well supported by team managers. Supervision is taking place regularly, although the recording and effectiveness of this are too variable. Inspectors found stronger practice in the leaving care service. Social workers report that they enjoy the variety of training, including around strengths-based practice, which helps them to build effective relationships with families in which there have been entrenched and chronic issues.
46. The recruitment of care-experienced young people to work for South Tyneside Council is a positive development in helping to bring the voices of children in care into the service and to inform strategic planning. Participation opportunities for children in care and care-experienced young people have been developed well. The 'Market Place', a hub co-designed by children and young people, is a valuable resource from which participation activities take place.
47. The corporate parenting committee aims to provide strategic oversight of operational performance. The corporate parenting strategy has identified issues of concern to focus on, such as sufficiency. However, until the time of this inspection, the committee has not been adequately sighted on the risks and vulnerabilities of children placed in the 'staffed houses'. Children in care and

care leavers benefit from a range of themed workshops, which enables some children's and young people's voices to inform service developments.



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