

Inspection of Hartlepool local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 18 March to 22 March 2024

Lead inspector: Louise Walker, His Majesty's Inspector

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

Since the last ILACS judgement inspection in 2018, senior leaders in Hartlepool have continued to develop and improve services for children and families. Senior leaders have not only sustained the good practice and leadership seen at the last inspection, they have been relentless in driving further progress and improvements. This is in the context of continuing to provide an effective service to children and families throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and a significant increase in complexity of need and demand on services.

Inspectors saw consistently good practice across all parts of the service with exceptionally strong management oversight and a leadership team with an unwavering commitment to children and the workforce.

There are many examples of positive practice with families seen during this inspection. The key practice strengths include consistent responses to concerns about the most vulnerable children in the borough in a very strong 'front door' service, and compassionate work with children and families throughout all service areas. Children come into care when they need to, and they are thriving. This means that the overwhelming majority of children who need help, protection or care in Hartlepool receive an outstanding service that helps to improve their lives.

What needs to improve?

- Clarity for care leavers about their rights and entitlements through the care leavers offer.
- The support and responses to care leavers in custody.

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

1. There is a very strong and effective focus on providing help early to children and their families and a preventative approach across all the levels of need, vulnerability and risk. When children are identified as needing help and protection, staff and managers consistently make the best decisions for them to ensure that help and support are provided for children at the earliest opportunity and children's lives improve as a result.
2. There are effective relationships between early help and statutory services and children's cases are appropriately stepped up and down when their needs or risks change. Strong, well-coordinated multi-agency support is provided through the family hubs, which means that children receive the right help and support at the right time for them.
3. The quality and timeliness of referrals from partners are consistently strong. Parental consent is routinely recorded by most professionals. Workers in the front door are clear about when to dispense with parental consent to safeguard children and the rationale for this is recorded and has clear management oversight. The initial screening by the children's hub (CHub) workers is very effective, which means that children and their families are directed to the right service at the earliest opportunity.
4. Thresholds of need and risk are thoroughly understood and consistently applied. Referrals are consistently and appropriately prioritised to ensure timely responses for children and their families despite a substantial increase in demand at the front door. Experienced and skilled social workers in the CHub are professionally curious. They gather and analyse historical information clearly and effectively and consider the complexity of each family's needs. This leads to robust decision-making for children and their families and has contributed to a reduction in repeat contacts about children and provides a really strong base for subsequent assessment work to build on. Consistently strong managerial oversight results in children receiving timely, proportionate and appropriate responses. This is an improvement since the last inspection.
5. Partnership working is a significant strength in the CHub because of the co-location and seamless joint working of partner agencies. There is a very strong culture of help and protection being 'everybody's' business. This ensures that information is gathered quickly, is specific and is analysed appropriately.

Immediate responses to domestic abuse in the CHub are prioritised and appropriate action is taken to safeguard children and adults. This work is strengthened by the training that staff have received to highlight the effects of domestic abuse on children.

6. When safeguarding concerns are identified, strategy meetings are held swiftly. They include key partners and lead to effective decision-making to safeguard children. Child protection enquiries are thorough, with effective actions taken to help reduce harm to children.
7. When children are at risk of exploitation or have been missing, effective systems in the multi-agency child exploitation (MACE) service ensure that prompt action is taken. Longer-term risks are being reduced for children because of the strengths-based relationships and determined intervention of workers across all teams. When children go missing, workers in the MACE service ensure that children's views are captured through timely, high-quality return home interviews. The coordinated information is captured and used effectively to contribute to the highly effective multi-agency work undertaken to disrupt exploitation activity.
8. Responses to children and families who require help and support at evenings and weekends are appropriate. Immediate action is taken when needed, including holding strategy discussions to manage risk effectively and improve children's situations.
9. Social work assessments of children's needs are exceptionally thorough and child centred. They are timely and lead to proportionate responses to risk and need. Creative and sensitive engagement with children and their parents ensures that assessments focus on the lived experiences of children. Child-in-need and child protection plans support parents to understand what needs to change and how they will be helped and supported. Plans are focused on children's needs and address risk factors. They contain relevant interventions to help children and adults, and the majority have clear timescales set. This means that all parties are clear about what needs to happen and by when, which is helping to improve children's situations in a time frame that is meaningful to them.
10. Multi-agency review meetings for children in need of help and protection are attended by a relevant range of professionals who are involved with children and their families. These meetings are effective forums for timely information-sharing, planning and decision-making for children and their families.
11. Children are visited regularly in line with their needs, and they are seen alone when appropriate. Children benefit from a range of creative and bespoke direct work to help gather their wishes and feelings. Social workers' recording of visits to children is clear and purposeful. This will help to provide clarity and explanations of interventions should children access their records in later life.

12. When risks to children are not reducing, they benefit from timely decisions to escalate into pre-proceedings and care proceedings. Senior managers maintain a thorough and effective overview of the pre-proceedings stage of the Public Law Outline (PLO). Since the last inspection, improvements have been made to the tracking of the PLO to ensure that children are not subject to pre-proceedings for longer than necessary. Letters before proceedings are detailed and thoughtfully written and identify the individual risks to children effectively. Parents are clear about what is expected of them and what support they will get to enable their children to stay safely living with them whenever possible.
13. The constant focus on strengths and risks for children across all areas of their lives is underpinned by the local authority's chosen restorative model of practice. Social workers are very skilled at identifying risk, balanced with a strengths-based, child-centred approach which has improved the circumstances of many children and families, enabling them to remain living together safely.
14. Workers routinely include members of family networks and the focus on family engagement is extensive and impressive. Workers consistently ensure that wider family members and those important adults in children's lives are central to delivering support, reducing risks and improving situations for children.
15. There is detailed management oversight and recording when key decisions are made in children's lives. Informal manager and peer discussions take place outside of formal supervision, but these rich conversations are not always recorded.
16. Disabled children are supported by skilled and caring practitioners who are working with children with highly complex needs. Staff expertly support children to have a say in what is important to them. The relationship-based model of practice is embedded and shines through in children's records.
17. There are a very small number of children in private fostering arrangements. When children live in these arrangements, appropriate assessments and checks are undertaken, and regular oversight is in place. Visits to this group of children are carried out regularly and their views about their living arrangements sought.
18. The local authority designated officer provides a highly effective and responsive service. Designated officer records are detailed, with clearly recorded rationale for decision-making and appropriate links made to safeguarding individual children in their records. The local authority designated officer fulfils a range of functions, including providing training and advice, which is particularly valued by schools.
19. The local authority closely monitors children who are missing education. Positive professional relationships with schools and academies ensure that there are clear and well-established systems in place to identify, check and manage

children who are missing education. They maintain a sharp focus on ensuring the safety and welfare of individual children.

20. The local authority has developed specialist teams in response to the significant increase in children who are electively home educated. This is helping to ensure clear oversight of these children.
21. Children aged 16 and 17 who are at risk of becoming homeless, or present as homeless, receive a responsive service. They are quickly supported to remain at home when it is safe to do so. When it is not, they are advised of their legal rights to enable them to make informed decisions about options available to them, including the right to become a child in care.

The experiences and progress of children in care: outstanding

22. Children come into care in Hartlepool when this is the most appropriate plan for them. Inspectors saw very effective use of family network meetings to deliver edge of care work and to identify other family members to care for children when they cannot safely remain at home.
23. Feedback from the local judiciary and Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) is extremely positive. Social workers in Hartlepool produce high-quality evidence and assessments for court, which helps to ensure that legal proceedings are concluded in a timely way. This results in swift plans being secured for children's future care.
24. Most children benefit from living in suitable permanent homes, with the vast majority of children thriving and being cared for in their home area. Most children make notable and sustained progress. A very small number of cared for children live at a distance from their home area. This is due to a lack of local placements to meet their needs. These decisions are not taken lightly, and placements are made based on a child's risk assessment and level of need. Leaders have active plans in place to bring children back to Hartlepool as soon as they are able. Children living at a distance receive a high level of support and regular contact from their social workers wherever they live.
25. The majority of children in care live with foster carers. Many have been with the same carers for a number of years and have formed secure attachments and are making good progress. When children live in children's homes, they receive good-quality care and support. A very small number of children with complex needs experience too many changes in placement. Senior leaders maintain close oversight of these children's care to ensure that appropriate wraparound help is implemented to support the child during and after moves. Leaders go the extra mile to appropriately challenge poorly performing providers who do not provide an appropriate level of care and support to Hartlepool children. A very small number of children are living in unregistered provision. Managers and leaders have clear and regular oversight of these children's circumstances and are working to progress registration.

26. Children in care enjoy strong and positive relationships with their social workers, who are consistent and trusted adults in their lives. Workers are clearly proud of 'their children' and talk with affection, commitment and care about them. Some children have had the same social worker for many years. The continuity in relationships is heartwarming and is instrumental in supporting children to form strong attachments with key adults in their lives.
27. A very high proportion of children attend their children in care reviews and are fully supported to have a purposeful say in their plans. Independent reviewing officer footprint in children's case recording is evident, showing regular visits in between reviews to ensure that children's views on their care informs their plans. This area of practice has improved considerably since the last inspection.
28. There is a detailed and considered response to children's cultural identity. There is a clear focus on ethnicity and religion and on the community in which children grew up. This enables children to have a good understanding and sense of who they are.
29. Children live with their brothers and sisters when this is right for them, informed by thorough assessments. When this is not appropriate, there is well-considered planning about how and when they should see one another, and every effort is made to maintain safe relationships and family identity. Social workers understand the importance of family time for children and promote this in line with children's wishes, feelings, safety and emotional needs.
30. Cared for children typically make good educational progress from their starting points. Since the previous inspection, there has been further investment in the virtual school, which has increased the capacity to support children in care and their educational engagement and outcomes. The virtual school works in close partnership with schools and demonstrates the role of a corporate parent effectively. They advocate for children in care to ensure that decisions made are in the best interests of individual children. Consideration is given to the academic outcomes as well as the broader development of children in care. As a result, children are well supported to engage with, and participate in, learning.
31. Children's physical and mental health needs are well addressed in care planning. Social workers have oversight of children's health needs, particularly routine health appointments, which are up to date.
32. Disabled children in care benefit from workers who understand their complex health needs. Workers skilfully coordinate a number of professionals to ensure that children and their carers are well supported. Strong partnership working is supporting children's needs to be promptly met.
33. Those children who go missing from care are quickly identified and supported to enable risks to reduce. Return home interviews are effective and enable

managers to monitor themes and trends, which are fed into the MACE, where appropriate. The information gathered helps to better safeguard children.

34. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in care are supported by committed social workers who are sensitive to their cultural needs and to their experiences. They receive a good balance of practical and emotional support that caters to their individual needs. Social workers show a good awareness of their histories, the risks arising from the journey that unaccompanied young people have made, and the trauma experienced by them.
35. The voice of children is valued and threaded throughout the service. Children have a solid influence in shaping the local authority's provision of services through a range of groups and participation events. Children's achievements are enthusiastically celebrated through success events every October half term and an annual awards ceremony. Children say that they thoroughly enjoy these events.
36. Considered and thoughtful planning ensures that children live with the right foster carers. Impressively, inspectors saw examples of some children attending panel when decisions are made about their long-term care when it was right for them to be there. Children benefit from having their permanence secured swiftly through adoption when this is the plan for them. The strong focus on early permanence helps to avoid delay in deciding a child's future, at a time in their life when days and weeks really matter. There are strong relationships between the Regional Adoption Agency (Tees Valley Adoption) and the local authority. This ensures that there is good oversight of children who may need adoption through the early notification process. This allows time for prospective adopters to be considered and reduces delay for children. The quality of assessments provided by Hartlepool is good; there is clear information about children, which supports the panel in making timely, safe recommendations about matching. Plans for children to move to their adopters' care are thoughtful and give children and their adopters the best chance of bonding and supporting these relationships to thrive.
37. Foster carers spoken with gave exceptionally positive feedback about their experiences both before and throughout the assessment process. They feel well supported by the service, which helps them to provide high-quality care to children. Adopters also speak highly about the excellent support and advice provided by their social worker from the beginning to the end of the assessment process.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: good

38. Young people leaving care are well supported by committed staff, multi-agency partners and political leaders, who collectively take their corporate parenting responsibilities very seriously. There is a palpable culture across children's social care and among council leaders and members that care leavers are 'their' children. This is exemplified by the high numbers of care leavers either being

permanently employed, in apprenticeships or in social care roles in the council. Their voice, influence and experiences are benefiting other care leavers and modelling what they can achieve with the right support.

39. Most pathway plans are co-produced and shared with care leavers. These plans are detailed, effective and regularly reviewed and provide specific actions to meet the individual needs of care leavers. Care leavers have access to key documents and understand how to access their records should they wish to. Sensitive consideration is given to how best to emotionally support the young person with this.
40. Care leavers have effective and trusting relationships with their personal advisers (PAs), who are highly skilled and go above and beyond to support the care leavers they are working with. Most PAs visit young people frequently and in line with their needs and wishes.
41. Care leavers live in suitable, good-quality accommodation that meets their needs. The recently developed 'staying close' offer provides intensive support for a small number of children and young people. Most young people spoken to said they felt supported emotionally and felt ready to move on to independence. Most care leavers receive individual support with independence skills, including group sessions from the pathfinder hub, to help them with wider life and practical skills.
42. For the very small number of care leavers in custody, attempts to keep in touch by their PA are inconsistent, with significant gaps in visits and contact. The pathway plans for these care leavers are not completed with them, nor shared with them, and multi-agency plans supporting their impending release are not visible in their records.
43. Transition planning is embedded for most care leavers. Pathway plans are created from age 16 by social workers in the through care team with consideration of what services will meet the child's needs when they are adults. Social workers remain involved with young people beyond 18 when this is the right decision for them.
44. Capacity constraints have impacted on the ability to allocate PAs before a child reaches 18. However, this is the aspiration moving forward as leaders have secured additional PA resources. Some children who are staying close or have higher needs meet with their PA earlier, which is positive.
45. Care leavers are actively encouraged and supported practically to maintain important safe links with family, friends and previous carers subject to their wishes.
46. Care leaver participation in service development is actively encouraged through involvement in panel interviews for senior leadership roles. The care leavers forum meets weekly at the new hub development. This is providing a safe and community-based environment for care leavers to meet and access crucial

support and develop independence skills to help them navigate their path to adulthood.

47. PAs are highly attuned to care leavers' emotional well-being and health needs, and these are captured in their pathway plans and regularly reviewed. Most care leavers have access to their health passports. For a small number of care leavers, accessing emotional and mental health support can be more challenging, with few available bespoke services locally. PAs are accessing creative resources to help them to support young people's emotional well-being and this is mitigating the long waits for formal assessments for young people.
48. Care leavers who are unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people are receiving sensitive and individualised support to meet their cultural, faith and emotional needs. PAs support them emotionally and practically through their asylum application process.
49. Efforts to engage and work with vulnerable care leavers who are parents are robust and persistent, which means that young people and their children receive the support and services they need.
50. PAs are very alert to risks for their care leavers. They work effectively with multi-agency partners, including police, health and probation, to support care leavers to be safer.
51. Most care leavers are encouraged and practically helped to access employment and training opportunities. The virtual school and senior leaders are committed to increasing care leavers' opportunities to engage in further education, employment or training (EET) but recognise that the numbers not in EET remain too high. The local authority has meaningful plans in place to further support young people to gain employment.
52. The local offer is well established in Hartlepool. Most care leavers understand their rights and entitlements, including access to independent advocacy, but not all know how to make a formal complaint. Not all PAs have fully understood the local offer, which has affected the experiences of a small number of care leavers. This relates mainly to council tax exemption for young people living outside of Hartlepool. As a result, a small minority of care leavers have not been able to benefit fully from the support that is available.
53. When young people reach 21, they have an opportunity to maintain regular visits by their PA. If they choose not to have visits, the offer remains up to the age of 25 to opt back into services if they choose. Lines of communication are kept open between the local authority and the care leaver whenever possible. Until very recently, this has not been widely understood by all PAs. This shortfall had been identified by senior managers in recent audit work. Senior leaders recognise there is more to do to ensure that the offer is fully understood by all staff. They have effective plans in place to make the

improvements needed so that they can support all care leavers effectively to understand their rights and entitlements.

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

54. Children's social care is led very effectively by an experienced and credible director of children's services (DCS). Working with the senior leadership team, she has created a genuine ethos across the service where children are seen as, and valued as 'our children', and this permeates through the workforce and the multi-agency partnership.
55. The culture created by the DCS and the senior leadership team shines through all conversations and practice. This small, but confident, ambitious and influential leadership team models expected behaviour, which sets clear expectations for staff. They are highly visible and inspire staff to perform well for children in Hartlepool. The grip they have on children's social care and individual circumstances is exceptional.
56. The demand at the front door has increased significantly and the degree of child and family need is increasingly complex. Leaders thoroughly understand this profile and capacity has been increased where possible. The wider council and partner agencies are actively engaged, taking collective responsibility to help and support children and families. This is key to the success in driving change and continual improvement from an already strong base. The quality of the leadership and strive for innovation and improvement is exemplified in their involvement in pilots around the social care reforms and sector-led improvement.
57. The lead member and the managing director of the council are strong advocates for children's services and have a clear understanding of their corporate parenting role. The senior leadership team ensures that elected members are sighted on the performance data, what it means, and the key challenges facing children's services and the wider council. There is unwavering support from political leaders across the council, who have faith in the social care leadership. This is reflected in corporate decision-making and is helping to secure investment to increase capacity in the workforce and placement sufficiency.
58. The enthusiastic corporate parenting lead member knows of most children in care and care leavers by their names. They actively promote children and young people's attendance at board meetings and their involvement in the development sessions to look at service improvements. This has resulted in children and young people being actively involved in the development of services and the offer to children leaving care.
59. Effective arrangements and mechanisms are in place for respectful challenge across the council and across partners through a shared safeguarding

partnership. Partnership working is a real strength in Hartlepool at both a strategic and practice level. Strong positive feedback was provided from the family courts and Cafcass. Work in the court arena is described as 'well managed and well led'.

60. Leaders have a clear overview of staff performance and practice quality, all of which is driven by the clear expectation that children's lived experiences and outcomes are the overriding priority. Management oversight at all levels is very strong, with a clear line of sight and challenge. This ensures that when concerns are identified, decisions and actions are swiftly taken.
61. Senior leaders know their service very well. The self-evaluation accurately reflects the service, and inspectors found very little that leaders are not already sighted and acting on. The inconsistency in the support to care leavers has already been identified by senior leaders and plans put in place for it to be strengthened. Learning from audit activity is used well to inform and improve service developments and practice. Throughout the inspection, leaders reflected on inspection findings and were responsive to these.
62. Leaders are well sighted on the recent decline in longer-term placement stability and understand the range of reasons for this. Some are beyond their control and indicative of the sufficiency challenges in the sector. Effective use of monitoring data and regional discussions are informing work to develop plans to address these challenges.
63. There is a relentless focus on the ongoing recruitment and retention of frontline managers and social workers, resulting in a stable workforce with very limited use of interim workers. This means that children are benefiting from enduring and trusting relationships with a consistent worker.
64. The workforce has access to an extensive training offer. The local authority is investing well in 'growing their own' social workers with investment in national recruitment and step-up programmes. Students are well supported to 'flourish safely'. There has been an improved focus on family networks and children's voices. Newly qualified social workers are well supported through a well-established assessed and supported year in employment programme.
65. Staff have challenging but manageable caseloads that allow for meaningful engagement with children. The close working relationships across the teams support the management of peaks in activity well. The quality of supervision records is generally strong. The vast majority of social workers said that they receive regular case supervision alongside almost continuous informal and peer supervision, which supports their practice and ensures that plans are progressed for children.
66. Workers told inspectors that they are proud to work for Hartlepool and staff morale is very good. Like the children in Hartlepool, the workforce is listened to, cared for and cared about by senior leaders. The words and actions of

senior leaders convey to staff a genuine sense of belonging and trust in their roles and in the organisation. One worker said, 'It's an amazing place to work.' Workers across the whole service articulate a shared vision that 'we do right by our children'. This culture created by senior leaders is having a positive impact on staff retention.

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