

# Inspection of North Tyneside local authority children's services

**Inspection dates:** 11 to 15 November 2024

**Lead inspector:** Ceri Evans, His Majesty's Inspector

<b>Judgement</b>	<b>Grade</b>
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	Outstanding
Overall effectiveness	Outstanding

Since the previous inspection, in 2020, when the overall effectiveness judgement was outstanding, senior leaders have continued to strengthen, improve and innovate services to benefit children and their families. The director of children's services (DCS) leads by example and encourages staff to do their best for children. Leaders have a thorough understanding of the strengths and quality of the services being provided, they know where improvement is needed, and they make it happen. Strong political support ensures that there is an unwavering commitment from across the council to support senior leaders to continually improve local and accessible early family help, and to deliver outstanding services to children in need of help, protection and care. This is improving the lives and well-being of children and families in the borough.

An exceptionally strong corporate parenting approach drives practice and service improvement. All council staff are required to understand what it means to be a good corporate parent. This is written into job descriptions across the whole council, not just in children's social care. This approach is significantly benefiting children in care and care leavers as their needs are better understood and responded to. This encourages the workforce to do the best for their children.

## What needs to improve?

- Attendance of multi-agency partners at key decision-making meetings for children in need of help and protection.
- The consistency and quality of written contingency plans.

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

1. Children in need of help or protection benefit from high-quality services that improve their lives, whatever the level of their need, vulnerability or risk. Thresholds for support at an early help level are understood and owned by the multi-agency partnership. An exceptional early help service makes a significant difference for children and families who need support. Strong partnership engagement, together with easily accessible early help hubs, is enabling families to access timely, well-targeted help when their needs are first identified.
2. Early help assessments and plans are detailed and reflect the voices of children well. Impressively, a high percentage of early help assessments are completed by partner agencies. The work undertaken by skilled practitioners is underpinned by a strengths-based model of practice. This helps practitioners to understand and explore children's lived experiences, and it encourages families to identify the support they require to address their needs.
3. Since the last inspection, the early help emotional well-being offer has been significantly strengthened. The Health, Information & Advice, Virtual School and Emotional Wellbeing (HIVE) team includes nurses, teachers, counsellors, educational psychologists and occupational therapists, as well as a team of administrators who support with appointments. This service is jointly funded with the NHS and, together with partners, they work across the borough, not only within social care but in schools and with wider partners to support the physical, emotional and intellectual growth of children. They deliver trauma-informed training across schools in the borough and across the whole of children's social care. As a result, key partners are developing a greater understanding of the impact of trauma on children's communication, behaviours and lived experiences.
4. Decision-making at the 'front door' (the first point of contact for families and professionals) is timely and highly effective. Managers and staff are professionally curious and always have the child in mind when making decisions. Managers maintain strong oversight of work coming into the front door and provide incredibly detailed directions to workers. Responses are child centred and focus on what needs to happen to make children safer.
5. Strong and robust partnership working in the front door supports a timely and carefully considered response to domestic abuse notifications. Daily triage of

concerns takes place within a multi-agency domestic abuse meeting. Immediate safety planning is considered, with a clear analysis of risk. Management rationale for next steps is clearly recorded.

6. When children's needs escalate or risks increase, there is a highly effective and timely response. Detailed information-sharing at strategy meetings enables appropriate and swift decision-making by managers, which then informs child protection enquiries. This is leading to clear multi-agency protection plans being put in place for children. The rationale for decisions is clearly documented and interim plans are created. While contingency plans are discussed, these are not always clearly recorded.
7. Management oversight of child protection enquiries is strong. In addition, independent child protection chairs offer additional oversight and have an eight-day check-in with workers to ensure that appropriate interim safety measures are in place while enquiries are undertaken. This is a noteworthy strength and demonstrates an unwavering commitment from leaders and managers to prevent drift and delay for children and to make children safer.
8. Child protection conferences are timely and strengths based. Parents and their wider network are encouraged to fully participate in exploring the reason for the conference and the risks to their child. The child's voice and their experiences are central to the discussion. This approach is making a real difference to children and is increasing the skills and resilience of families. Key partner agencies attend these meetings and contribute very effectively to the decision-making process, but not all agencies regularly attend. While most provide reports to contribute to information-sharing, their absence means they do not fully contribute to multi-agency decision-making and planning. Senior leaders are aware of this and are actively engaged in discussions with the wider partnership.
9. Children's assessments are comprehensive. Social workers understand risks and protective factors very well. Very strong and creative direct work undertaken with children is informing assessments and plans. Child-in-need and child protection plans support parents to understand what everyone is worried about and what needs to change. The use of family network meetings is very well embedded and effective. Social workers are incredibly skilled at identifying and working alongside the whole family to help bring about positive changes to the child's lived experience. Consequently, the quality of participation by family members is impressive.
10. There is improved management oversight of pre-proceedings under the Public Law Outline since the last inspection. The work undertaken in pre-proceedings is increasingly effective. Letters before proceedings are jargon-free and provide a detailed explanation to parents about what is expected of them. Support for parents, thorough assessments and meaningful direct work with children by skilled social workers are diverting many families from family court proceedings appropriately.

11. Social workers know children extremely well and visit in line with children's needs and risks. Direct work is purposeful and takes place at a frequency and pace suitable to the child's individual circumstances. Inspectors saw many examples of direct work being used to explore sensitively the impact of domestic abuse and of it helping to reduce incidents of children going missing from home. This work is highly effective in better protecting children from harm. Social workers are also very skilled in identifying and responding to the needs of disabled children and their families.
12. Children who are missing from care, those experiencing exploitation or those at risk of extra-familial harm receive targeted and highly individualised support. Multi-agency information-sharing practices are clear and purposeful. All professionals work from a shared understanding of the 'whole story' from the perspective of the child. They combine their skills, expertise and resources to prevent, tackle and disrupt exploitation in all its forms. Children are routinely offered meaningful and thorough return home conversations, which provide social workers with insight about reasons for episodes of going missing from home. Improved take-up of return home interviews is helping social workers and partners to build a clearer understanding of how to 'disrupt and distract' future missing-from-care episodes.
13. There is a timely and consistent response to young people who present as homeless, underpinned by well-established and close partnership working between housing and children's social care.
14. Young carers are supported by a range of professionals across North Tyneside. Assessments are detailed and very child centred. They capture the voice of the child in their own words and demonstrate a real understanding of the child's world and their caring responsibilities. The assessment documents have been co-designed with children and young people so that the detail and content reflect what is important to them.
15. Children who are privately fostered make good progress and benefit from effective risk-based assessments and planning. They are visited regularly, and their wishes are heard. Leaders continue to work with partners to raise awareness of children who are privately fostered.
16. The local authority designated officer (LADO) service is consistently effective in its oversight of allegations against those in a position of trust. Decision-making meetings are timely and take full account of the presenting risk for children. The LADO service undertakes regular multi-agency training to promote awareness of their role. Consequently, professionals are more informed about what needs to be referred on to the LADO, which helps to better protect children.
17. Clear processes are in place to oversee children who are identified as electively home educated. The local authority provides appropriate guidance for parents on

how to educate their children at home and informs parents about where they can get help. Equally, the oversight of children missing education is effective. There is a culture in North Tyneside in which school attendance and the safety of children is everyone's responsibility. This shared responsibility is helping to ensure that the most vulnerable children in education are better protected from harm.

18. Throughout this inspection, the strengths-based and relational approach with children and their families has been palpable. From early help, through to the edge of care service, families are routinely offered family network meetings, which help to harness support from extended families and friends to keep children safer. Exceptionally strong practice was seen by inspectors in the keeping families connected service. This service works effectively and successfully with children and families in helping to maintain or reunite children with their birth families safely and appropriately. This provision of support is proportionate to the needs of families and is helping to safely prevent many children entering care.

### **The experiences and progress of children in care: outstanding**

19. Children only come into care when it is in their best interests, and when skilled social workers have been unable to help families to achieve positive change or identify alternative carers. Social workers are diligent in their efforts to explore all circumstances thoroughly in order to support children to live safely within their extended families. Assessments of family members are completed by experienced workers, who fully explore all aspects of prospective carers' and guardians' capacity to meet the needs of children.

20. Social workers are aspirational for children in these arrangements to achieve permanence where appropriate. Comprehensive and bespoke support is given to children and their carers so as to increase the success of family placements. These placements are supported by family network meetings to provide wider family support where required, and practical and financial support to those who wish to become special guardians. This is increasing carers' confidence and capability in their caring role, which is helping to prevent the breakdown of these family arrangements. As a result of this, increasing numbers of children who enter care are achieving a sense of belonging and permanence by living with family members who are well supported to become their special guardians.

21. Leaders, managers and social workers have an unstinting commitment to helping children to achieve security, stability and a sense of belonging. They ensure that all different routes to permanence are based on what is right for the individual child. Senior manager oversight of children's permanence plans is impressive. Consequently, most children do not experience delay in living with their permanent carers.

22. More recently, social workers responsible for children have made appropriate recommendations to the family court, when care proceedings are initiated. The

local family judiciary did express to inspectors that some practice had deteriorated previously. Senior leaders acted swiftly, and, as a result, current practice has improved significantly. This was confirmed by the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), who said that good use is made of pre-proceedings to undertake assessments of key adults and children, to ascertain their views, wishes and feelings. Robust risk assessment and much-improved care applications are leading to the timely completion of proceedings and children achieving permanence.

23. Children in care benefit from high-quality support and care from committed social workers and carers. Most children live in safe, secure and settled placements. They move only when it is safe to do so, and in line with their individual care plan. When children do need to move, social workers carefully support and prepare children to move home.
24. Assessments of foster carers are timely, detailed and analytical. The foster carers who spoke with inspectors were very complimentary about the service and the support they receive. The preparation and training of prospective foster carers are very thorough, and this prepares them well for the fostering role.
25. Adoption work with children is strong. Effective working and communication with the regional adoption agency (RAA), (Adopt North East), hosted by North Tyneside, mean that adoption is considered for all children where this may best meet their needs. There is no delay in identifying suitably matched adopters for children. Adopters are equally positive about their experience and the quality of children's social work practice. They feel very well supported. Effective training and support build adopters' confidence and help to ensure that children have the best chance of success in their adoptive families.
26. Children who live in residential homes experience good-quality care and support. Impressively, senior leaders' sufficiency strategy has doubled the number of in-house and local homes for children. North Tyneside also has its own supported accommodation. This means more children can live within their own community and close to family networks where appropriate.
27. Where appropriate, decisions for children to return home from care are based on a clear assessment of risk. There is evidence of robust senior management oversight of these arrangements. Care orders are revoked at an appropriate time, so that children and their families are not subject to unnecessary statutory interventions.
28. Disabled children in care live in stable homes that meet their needs well. Social workers in the disabled children's team champion the voice of the child. They are acutely attuned to how each individual child communicates, so that their wishes and feelings are heard, valued and acted on.

29. Since the last inspection, there has been significant investment in the independent reviewing officer (IRO) service. Reduced caseloads have improved IRO oversight of care planning, which helps to ensure that children's plans progress at pace. IROs are rightly proud of the work they do and could easily articulate how the service has developed since the last inspection. They keep in touch with children on a regular basis, and many children benefit from stable relationships with their IROs. One worker said: 'We might be a small authority, but we have mighty ambition for our children.'
30. Senior leaders have continued to strengthen their family time service. Workers are exceptionally committed to ensuring that children and their parents have safe and well-supported time together. More children and their families are now accessing their family time in community hubs, which is helping to build on their network should reunification be successful. The venues enable parents to demonstrate their parenting skills during family time. Parents are provided with bespoke assistance and advice, where needed, to ensure that their child or children have the best possible experience. All families have their own family activity box and an individual programme, and are supported by a consistent worker. This helps to build trusting relationships and enables children and their families to enjoy purposeful time together.
31. For a small number of children in care, there have been instances where they have lived in unregistered children's homes for short periods of time, and only in an emergency. There is very thorough senior management and social work oversight of these arrangements while registered placements are sourced.
32. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children receive very sensitive and effective responses to their needs. They are well supported by specialist workers who have a comprehensive understanding of their diverse needs. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are supported in suitable accommodation, including foster care. They are supported to meet other children in similar situations and take part in activities together. Impressively, their cultural and linguistic needs are very well understood and great care is taken to ensure that key documentation is not only translated into their own language, but their own regional dialect, which helps to ensure that children understand the area in which they live, and their rights and entitlements.
33. Direct work with children in care is a real strength. Children see their social workers regularly no matter where they live. Social workers know their children exceptionally well and clearly articulate the child's needs, plans and wishes. Social workers who spoke with inspectors positively beamed when they spoke about 'their children'.
34. Trauma-informed social work is practised across the service. It is transformational for children and for staff. Social workers are skilled at identifying the signs and symptoms of trauma and how this can affect children's behaviour. They work with openness and compassion, and seek to fully understand the child's lived

experience. The quality and impact of this work are impressive and are leading to focused and child-centred plans, and more positive outcomes for many children.

35. There has been a significant and meaningful investment and development in life-story work in North Tyneside. Sensitive work is undertaken with children to help them understand why they live in care, and to help them make sense of their histories. The quality of this practice is exceptional. A significant number of children in care now have digital life-story books. These are beautifully presented, interactive and engaging, and easily accessible to the child. Family members and professionals working with the child can input into the child's life story, but with strict security firewalls which prevent any information being uploaded to the child's record unless reviewed and signed off by the child's social worker. This innovative work helps children to accept and integrate their past, make sense of their present, and develop a clear sense of identity for children's futures.
36. Children's health needs are promptly and then progressively assessed through comprehensive and timely assessments that inform effective health plans. Many children benefit from accessible mental health and emotional health support through the HIVE. The HIVE offers multidisciplinary support to children in care. This service is invaluable and has been instrumental in improving the health and emotional well-being of many children.
37. Senior leaders work exceptionally well with the virtual school to put the education of children in care at the heart of strategic planning. The virtual school is highly ambitious in ensuring that children in care make good educational progress at school or in other provisions. The virtual school knows children very well and ensures that teams provide appropriate and timely support. Personal education plans (PEPs) are well considered and helpful for children in care. PEPs have clear agreed actions, which helps to ensure children are provided with timely support.
38. The achievements of children in care are celebrated well in North Tyneside. The Children in Care Council (CICC) and various other forums ensure that children have a meaningful influence on service delivery and design. Senior leaders, alongside the wider council, are very ambitious for children's future. They take their role as corporate parents seriously and are very responsive to what children feel, say and recommend.

## **The experiences and progress of care leavers: outstanding**

39. Care leavers benefit from stable and enduring relationships with their personal advisers (PAs). Most PAs have worked in North Tyneside for many years and know their young people extremely well. They are aspirational for, and committed to, improving the quality of life of care leavers in North Tyneside.
40. PAs become involved with children and young people early so that transitions to the leaving care service are carefully planned. Workers are proactive in creating opportunities to engage with care leavers, and they offer resources to help them



to gain practical skills, such as cooking and budgeting, and use very targeted and direct work to help to explore gaps in their understanding or skills.

41. PAs have exceptionally detailed understanding of young people's histories when they transfer into the service because of the quality of life-story work. Their practice is highly relational. They are persistent in their efforts to keep in contact with young people and are fierce advocates for them. They keep in touch frequently with care leavers and are responsive to their individual needs. Inspectors saw some wonderful examples of PAs going above and beyond their role to advocate for and support their care leavers as any good parent would.
42. Many of the young people remain in touch with the service far beyond the age of 25. Support for care leavers is tailored through effective pathway planning, in which their need for a wide range of individualised practical and emotional support is recognised. Pathway plans are impressive; they are detailed, individualised and co-produced with the care leaver. The voice of the care leaver is very much valued and central to their plan.
43. Care leavers benefit from a meaningful and accessible local offer. Leaders across the council insist that their care leavers have the same opportunities as any other child or young person. This takes a variety of forms, including subsidised council tax, wherever they live. Care leavers have access to good-quality housing and leisure opportunities. Leaders are also ambitious for young people's education, employment and training support, and health-related activities.
44. What is truly impressive about the local offer is the palpable underpinning of the concept of the council as the 'corporate parent'. The shared ethos of 'doing what good parents would do' across the whole council and wider partnership is a notable strength. This is exemplified in how job specifications across the council now include a description of what is expected of every council employee, regardless of their role, as a corporate parent. This truly elevates the 'parent' element of the corporate response and commitment to both children in care and care leavers.
45. Most care leavers are successfully engaged in employment, education or training. Care leavers are offered support and advice through the HIVE, or through a dedicated employment officer who provides drop-in clinics. Those who are not in education, training or employment are helped effectively in order to gain employability skills, to prepare for job interviews and gain apprenticeships. Links within the council, and through wider partnerships, mean that more employers are providing care leavers with opportunities for work experience, apprenticeships and other forms of employment. The buy-in from partners is very much driven by senior council leaders. There is an ambition to ensure that all care leavers are afforded the same opportunities as their peers.
46. Since the last inspection, there has been significant investment in providing a safe hub and meeting place for care leavers. The Lodge provides care leavers with lots

of opportunities to seek support and help in an informal setting as any other child would from their parents' home. This is a space where they can engage in a range of activities with their peers, seek advice from specialist workers or just pop in for a cup of tea and a chat. The Lodge is accessible and has been instrumental in helping young people to develop life skills and make friends. It is a place where young people can be themselves and enjoy time with peers, who may have had similar experiences.

47. Most care leavers live in good-quality accommodation that is consistent with the level of support they need. The young people who spoke with inspectors told us that they like where they live and feel safe in their homes and in their communities. Impressively, PAs have a very detailed understanding of care leavers' vulnerabilities, and the impact that trauma has on their health and well-being. Mental health support is provided through the HIVE service. Young people can access specialist mental health support, including talking therapies. Inspectors saw many examples of care leavers learning how to develop better coping strategies because of this invaluable support.
48. Care leavers in custody are well supported by their PAs. Strenuous efforts are made to ensure that contact is maintained with these young people. Well-planned and credible plans are put in place to support young people on their release back into their communities. This helps to give care leavers every chance of a successful transition back home on their release.
49. Care leavers who are parents have access to a wide range of targeted, helpful and practical support during pregnancy and as new parents. They are helped and supported by their PAs to be the best parent they can be.
50. Unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people who are care leavers are well supported. Workers understand young people's experiences and are attuned to the emotional impact of going through such a high-risk journey to safety. If needed, they are offered swift psychological support so that they can begin to make sense of their experiences and recover.
51. Care leavers' views are valued by senior leaders and are used to inform service design. Their voice is very influential. An example of their influence is via the Care4Me training package that young people have designed and delivered to workers. This was a successful training event and has now been incorporated into the Local Authority Workforce Development programme across the council.

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

52. Children's social care in North Tyneside benefits from a strong, stable and aspirational senior leadership team, whose members have an unstinting focus on the safety, well-being and progress of vulnerable children. Children's well-being is very much at the heart of the council's vision and values for children's social care.

The DCS, alongside her senior leadership team, models and demonstrates a culture that enables the positive impact of outstanding social work for many children and their families. The senior leadership team leads by example, and its members' unwavering commitment to improve children's lives is one that is shared and owned across the workforce.

53. Leaders have continued to innovate and develop children's services since the last inspection. Despite a change in DCS in 2022, the seamless transition of the then assistant director to the current DCS position has continued to build on the impressive progress and unstinting focus by the previous DCS on doing the right thing for children.
54. Corporate and political leaders are equally ambitious, purposeful and influential in providing outstanding children's social care. They too demonstrate an unwavering commitment to improving and enriching the lives of children and their families in North Tyneside. The chief executive officer is a critical element of this success, due to the style in which he encourages the wider council to take responsibility and have accountability for children's safety and progress. The local mayor and lead member of the council are incredibly knowledgeable and invested in driving change and improvement for their children. This collaborative and committed approach to making a difference to children's lives in the borough is evidenced in the significant and sustained financial investment in children's services. The wide range of successful community-based initiatives is having a hugely positive impact on children and their families, whatever their level of need.
55. Leaders at all levels are exceptionally proud corporate parents. The parenting element of their mantra is firmly embedded across the service and wider council. The corporate parenting board is very effective in championing and advocating for children. The CICC is extremely active, respected and influential with senior leaders, managers and staff. Children's voices are heard, valued and acted on wherever possible. Children have been supported to choose the priority improvements they would like to focus on. This includes the development and delivery of training, and improving the quality of life-story work. They have also shaped an independent living skills programme called Branching Out. These initiatives have made a huge and impactful difference to the lives of children.
56. North Tyneside is a progressive and outward-looking children's service. There is a real appetite and commitment from senior leaders to ongoing development and improvement. Senior leaders make effective use of performance management information and actively seek peer reviews. This provides leaders with an in-depth understanding of their service, what works well and what needs strengthening.
57. Excellent quality assurance systems give senior leaders a constant and accurate line of sight to practice, and to child and family experience. Senior leaders have effective lines of accountability. During the inspection, they demonstrated that they knew the children's cases well, and understood how their services were

meeting the needs of children, their families and carers. The self-evaluation was accurate. Inspectors did not find anything senior leaders were not aware of.

58. Services continue to develop in line with national developments and social care reforms. The continued development of their early intervention offer ensures that families can access much-needed support, and resources, close to where they live and when they need them. The strong focus on kinship care predates the current children's social care reforms in this local authority and is well established.
59. Partnership arrangements are extremely strong. Senior leaders and senior council members are influential in bringing partners together, including housing, police, health and education. They take time to build and maintain relationships with staff and partners, encouraging them to understand the benefits of a collaborative approach to safeguarding children and improving their outcomes. Because of this, there is a willingness across partner agencies to deliver the best services and outcomes for children.
60. Strategic and innovative planning mean that there is a strong and ambitious vision to increase placement sufficiency, and this is being achieved. A range of interventions have been developed to strengthen services and respond to changing demand. This includes piloting a fostering recruitment hub, continued growth in their residential estate and having greater availability of move-on accommodation for care leavers. While sufficiency challenges remain, it is evident that leaders have addressed, and continue to prioritise, this, so that children benefit from a wider choice of local placements.
61. Frontline management oversight is very strong, is valued by staff and is hugely supportive. This helps social workers and other staff to practise safely and to do better for their children and their families. Staff spoken with during the inspection were 'proud to wear the North Tyneside badge'. They feel very well supported by their colleagues, managers and senior leaders. Staff morale is high, and turnover is low. Caseloads are mostly manageable, and this helps to ensure that workers have the time to undertake quality direct work with children. The whole workforce benefits from a programme of continuous professional development. Staff at all levels access a wide range of training opportunities, which improves their expertise and confidence.
62. Social workers benefit from routine case and personal supervision, which is further enhanced by regular group supervision which is focused on a particular area of work. These reflective sessions are well attended. Workers are also given the opportunity to attend innovative and reflective supported group sessions, which include multi-agency partners. These sessions encourage staff to 'tell their story' to their peers and multi-agency partners. Staff are encouraged and exceptionally well supported to describe how they feel. They tell their story about the emotional impact of their work on their own well-being.

63. Staff comment positively about the impact of these pre-planned sessions. They find them to be hugely supportive and an opportunity for staff to support each other to share perspectives and their own feelings and to problem-solve together. These sessions are facilitated with much compassion, kindness and respect. They could only be delivered for staff within a workplace culture where they are cared for and where their well-being is a priority.
64. An unquestionable strength in North Tyneside is that leaders have successfully created a culture where social workers can safely practise and do their best for children. This authentic approach by leaders and valued investment in the workforce mean that staff want to stay and make a positive difference to children's lives.

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