

Inspection of Gateshead local authority children's services

Inspection dates: 2 to 6 December 2024

Lead inspector: Rachel Fairhurst, His Majesty's Inspector

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

Since the last inspection, in 2019, children in Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council continues to receive good services. Leaders have maintained and, in some areas, improved practice. Leaders are focused on learning and improving, to positively develop the services they provide. Leaders have an accurate understanding of further development needs and are aware of the continued areas for improvement identified in this inspection.

Strengthened early help systems and community based integrated provision provide holistic support and help for families. Children are safeguarded and thresholds for services are well understood. Most families receive the right help at the right time.

Children are supported to remain in their families through robust wraparound interventions, and the continued oversight of the independent reviewing officers (IROs) has been strengthened.

What needs to improve?

- The response to 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless.
- Consideration of the impact of being a young carer in wider child-in-need planning.
- The quality and impact of recorded supervision and management oversight of decisions.

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

1. The early help service in Gateshead is a strength. A wide range of early help services ensures that children access suitable support without delay from experienced workers. Parental consent for early help support is well understood and consistently applied. Nine family hubs operate across Gateshead, and they are providing a comprehensive all-age offer for families. The use of outreach locations and targeted resources ensures that the most vulnerable, with the highest level of need, are reached by services. Wider family networks are considered, and contingency plans are in place should needs escalate.
2. The initial response team (IRT) has effective systems in place to ensure that contacts and referrals are responded to swiftly by experienced and knowledgeable social workers. Partners have a sound understanding of thresholds, and decisions for children are clear. Parental consent is understood and, when needed, dispensed with appropriately. Previous interventions and children's histories inform risk. Absent and non-resident parents are spoken to, and their views are considered as part of the assessments. Partnerships in the front door are robust, long-standing and sufficiently challenging, which ensures that the right decisions are made for children, at the right time.
3. The information obtained by workers about the child in IRT is thorough. They ensure that they gain an understanding of the immediate concern and of the child's experience. The recording of information is mostly detailed and summarised by the social workers and overseen by the duty manager. While most decisions made are appropriate, the records themselves do not consistently demonstrate a detailed management rationale for the decision made.
4. The multi-agency response to domestic abuse referrals is robust and well embedded. The impact of domestic violence on children's lived experiences is well understood and considered in IRT, which results in an appropriate and proportionate response to concerns.
5. Experienced staff provide effective support for children and families when concerns arise out of hours, including at the weekend. Safety planning enables an effective response to immediate risk to protect children from further harm.

Robust handovers with daytime services ensure a joint approach to managing risk and providing support for children and their families.

6. When children are assessed to be children in need, or in need of protection, they are allocated to the assessment and intervention teams in a timely way. When safeguarding concerns arise, decisions to convene a strategy meeting, including for disabled children, are mostly appropriate and respond to presenting or escalating concerns. Strategy meetings include key partners and information shared informs effective responses. Child protection enquiries address the concerns and risks for children, with the voice of the child clearly recorded. Most records are appropriately detailed with analysis and recommendations, which are overseen by managers.
7. Most assessments of children's needs are thorough and identify areas of need. Support is provided within a timescale that is right for the child. Multi-agency input informs assessments, and there is strong social work analysis, supported by clear management oversight. Children are seen promptly, and they are fully involved in their assessments with their wishes and feelings clearly represented. As part of the family's assessment, wider kinship networks are considered with Family Group Conferences used to gain an understanding of the role extended families can play in children's lives. This enables children to be supported within their families where this is appropriate and safe.
8. Multi-agency meetings are well attended by partners, and parents are encouraged to be present and share their views. There is some variability in the frequency of child protection core groups. However, regular reviews are held to ensure that plans progress without drift or delay. Safety plans ensure that families have a clear understanding of what needs to happen to improve children's safety.
9. Children's plans are mostly detailed and comprehensive. They address support needs, balanced with any areas of concern. For a small number of children, assessment outcomes are not reflected in plans, and some plans have timescales that are not specific and actions that are generic. The sharing and understanding of contingency planning with families are not always explicitly recorded on the child's file. Although managers authorise plans, their oversight has not always identified when plans were not specific in their actions or timescales.
10. Social workers know their children well and recognise their strengths. Direct work with children supports a child-centred and relationship-based approach to practice. Visits to children are regular and records include an overview of a conversation with each child.
11. Most children aged 16 and 17 who present as homeless receive a swift and proportionate service and their immediate safety is addressed. For a small number of children, it is not clear how risk was considered and for these

children, established homelessness procedures are not effective. Joint visits between a social worker and homeless prevention officer were not timely. These children did not have their rights explained to them early enough, causing delay in the children making informed decisions about whether to come into care. The use or offer of advocacy was not explicit on the child's file. Management oversight of children who are presenting as homeless does not clearly provide a rationale as to why decisions are being made.

12. Services for young carers in Gateshead have been refreshed. The new offer ensures that service delivery meets children's needs and fulfils its remit. A gap remains for some children who have additional needs and require support from children's social care. Plans for children who are young carers do not consider the impact of their role as a young carer in a holistic way. Some social workers are unclear as to the quality and nature of the service and support these children are receiving to inform wider planning.
13. Disabled children are supported and safeguarded effectively, through comprehensive multi-agency plans. Where children and families' needs change, reassessment is undertaken appropriately and reflected on in supervision.
14. The arrangements for children who are privately fostered are effective. These arrangements are assessed, plans are clear and address children's needs. There is solid oversight from managers, social workers and IROs to ensure that these arrangements are safe and appropriate.
15. The local authority designated officer (LADO) service ensures a robust response to allegations made against professionals who work with children. The LADO has increased awareness with key partner agencies and communities, which has led to a significant increase in enquiries. Responses to allegations are tracked effectively, and appropriate decision-making is ensuring that children are safeguarded.
16. When safeguarding concerns increase, most children enter the pre-proceedings phase of the Public Law Outline at a time that is right for them. Although many children receive an effective service, for a small number of children, a lack of capacity for specialist parenting assessments has led to a delay in decisions being made about their future. Multi-agency legal planning meetings inform planning for children, and most letters before proceedings are clear about what is expected of parents. Family group conferences are used well to prevent the escalation of concerns and to support children to remain living with their families when it is in their best interests.
17. The response to children who go missing or are at risk of exploitation is strong. Effective relationships formed with children help them to share their concerns in relation to gang affiliation, drug debts and safety concerns. Work with many children in this team has been successful in reducing their risk of harm through exploitation. Timely return home interviews are carried out, which results in essential information being obtained that is relevant to assessing and

understanding risk. There is a strong partnership approach to information-sharing, which results in an increased understanding of exploitation activity and leads to effective management and reduction of risk.

18. Clear guidance is in place to ensure that parents who choose to home educate their child are aware of what this entails. Children who are electively home educated or missing education are monitored effectively. They are tracked closely, and close multi-agency working ensures that they are better safeguarded.

The experiences and progress of children in care: good

19. Most children come into local authority care at the right time, and there is no evidence of children being left in situations of risk or harm. There is clear management oversight of, and agreement concerning, these plans, and senior leader chaired panels clearly provide evidence of the rationale behind decisions. Significant pre-proceedings work with families is carried out so that when a child does have to come into care, for most, this is a planned and informed decision.
20. When concerns for children escalate, the local authority enters legal proceedings in a timely way. Wider kinship carers are assessed to provide support or care if children are unable to remain with birth parents. Kinship carers receive a high level of support to successfully sustain placements. When no kinship carers are assessed as suitable, alternative placements outside of family networks are secured.
21. IROs are strong advocates for children, and this is an area of improved practice since the last inspection. IRO oversight is evident on children's records. IROs are using challenge effectively by escalating concerns to the right people at the right time. Children are encouraged to attend and participate in their reviews, and IROs visit children in between reviews to ensure that the child's voice is heard.
22. Care plans for children are tailored to the child's needs, and the voice of the child is clear. Regularly reviewed plans support children to progress and meet their goals. Plans include the input of key professionals, and, where appropriate, family members are actively consulted. This shows a level of shared responsibility for children and encourages families to feel more involved.
23. Children in care are well supported by carers and social workers who know them well and understand their needs. Social workers talk with care and passion about their children, and there is a real sense of pride when talking about their achievements. Most children are in stable placements, and they live with carers who meet their needs and advocate on their behalf.

24. Arrangements for children to see people who are important to them, including brothers and sisters who live elsewhere, are supported and informed by the child's wishes and feelings. This enables children to maintain relationships with significant people in their lives.
25. Comprehensive parenting assessments are carried out when considering the reunification of children with their parents. There is robust oversight of those children in care who live with their parents. This oversight is achieved through regular visits. The child's voice, wishes and feelings are gained and considered to inform planning.
26. Children are supported to live in children's homes when doing so is part of the most appropriate care plan to meet their needs. Children in care living outside of Gateshead receive the same strong level of service as those living in the borough. They are visited regularly by social worker and their IRO, both of whom keep in touch with calls in between reviews. Referrals for advocacy are made routinely for children living out of area. Children are supported to access therapeutic intervention when needed, which further strengthens an understanding of children's presenting behaviour and needs and helps to inform planning.
27. Planning for permanence and stability for children in care is strong. Plans for permanence are agreed at the earliest opportunity and are regularly reviewed by senior managers. Consideration is given to all permanence options, which reduces delay in determining children's future care arrangements.
28. A growing number of children secure timely permanence through arrangements such as special guardianship orders. The number of children living with kinship and connected carers is a real strength of practice. These arrangements benefit from effective intervention and support from skilled and knowledgeable workers. Clear and well-written kinship support plans help to direct interventions on specific areas of need. The kinship team provides additional help to those carers during time of need. This has been successful in helping children experience stability and a home that is promoting their sense of identity and belonging.
29. Children are supported to leave care to live with family members, or to remain permanently with their carers under special guardianship orders, when it is in their best interests. Decisions are based on a clear assessment of their need. Decisions are well documented, and a range of mechanisms are in place to agree and track these plans. Central to these decisions is the voice of the child, supported in records by creative and sensitive direct work and life-story work.
30. Children are well supported in their interests and hobbies and have access to a wide range of opportunities that meet their likes and expand their experiences. This helps them to develop positive life skills and enjoy their leisure time.

31. Children's health needs are being met, and routine health appointments are up to date. There is an appropriate focus on what support would benefit children with their emotional well-being, including life-story work. The Trusting Hands Gateshead team provides tailored advice, support and guidance to all those involved in caring for or overseeing the care of children. This helps social workers to plan accordingly for changes in placements and periods of dysregulation so that appropriate planning and support can be arranged.
32. The educational outcomes for pupils improve when they enter care. The virtual school is aspirational for children in care. It monitors children's progress effectively through personal education plan reviews and works strategically with schools to bring about improvement.
33. Most unaccompanied asylum-seeking children come to Gateshead via the National Transfer Scheme. A range of accommodation options are considered to best meet their needs. The educational needs of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are well met, with additional support from the virtual school when required. Their health needs are actively considered and supported, as is their access to activities and hobbies. Cultural and religious needs are also supported in the community, which helps to reduce isolation.
34. Children in Gateshead are only placed in unregistered settings as emergency short-term arrangements to safeguard children's welfare while suitable registered settings are secured. Providers of unregistered care are encouraged to progress registration. There is robust senior manager oversight of, and agreement on, the plan before it is progressed and to ensure that the arrangements meet children's needs.
35. The fostering service supports children and foster carers well. Foster carers benefit from the support provided by the mockingbird hubs, buddies and community foster carers. There has been a successful recruitment campaign, and assessments are carried out in a timely manner. Foster carers are positive regarding the training they receive. The fostering panel appropriately scrutinises these assessments and determines any shortfalls in information to support them to make safe recommendations. Agency decision-maker oversight ensures that foster carers are approved in a timely manner to prevent unnecessary delay.
36. There are positive relationships between the regional adoption agency (Adoption Northeast), and meaningful collaboration is supporting the needs of Gateshead children. Where appropriate, early permanence is considered and opportunities for early permanence through foster to adopt is embedded, reducing the number of moves for some children. When children are matched with prospective adopters, prompt, creative and carefully considered transition plans are developed to ensure that children are enabled to attach and settle with their forever family. Children who have a plan of adoption are provided with sensitive life-story work, including therapeutic work.

The experiences and progress of care leavers: good

37. Children are prepared well as they approach the transition from being in care to being care leavers. Personal advisers (PAs) are assigned to young people early, at a time that is right for the young person. Transition planning discussions, including for disabled children, start early and in collaboration with a range of agencies, including adult social care. An individual approach to the level of contact needed or wanted by children in the early stages of involvement is enabling personal advisers to build effective and trusting relationships. This is a key strength, and these relationships help young people to understand and access their rights and entitlements. Young people receive the right level of support that enables them to develop their independence skills.
38. Some PAs have high caseloads but remain tenacious in maintaining contact and see young people regularly. Support is provided by personal advisers up to the age of 25, unless the young person considers that they no longer require this. Support is flexible and individually determined by the support needs of care leavers, who dictate the levels of contact. Additional support is available through a daily duty service.
39. PAs know care leavers' histories. This provides continuity and reassurance for young people, who do not have to continually repeat their stories. PAs speak positively and with warmth about their young people and are ambitious for them, encouraging them to think nothing can hold them back.
40. PAs have a good understanding of the risks young people can be exposed to, and they take effective action to safeguard and promote their safety. They are alert to risks associated with poor mental health, providing additional support, and using partners effectively when this is required. Trusting Hands Gateshead has recently extended its remit to include care leavers, which provides another avenue for emotional well-being support.
41. Pathway plans for children who are approaching 18 are completed and reviewed. These plans can be brief, and for a small number of children, they are not completed directly with them. Pathway planning considers post-18 plans and, where appropriate, 'staying put' is discussed, which, for some children, is securing clarity in knowing where they will live post-18.
42. For most young people who are over 18, pathway plans are written collaboratively with the young person and are focused on their needs. They are in receipt of salient documents, such as health histories through the health passport, and are supported to access both universal and specialist services in support of their health needs, including emotional and mental health.
43. Plans routinely reflect the young person's interests and aspirations and sensitively identify their needs and vulnerabilities. These plans are not always

updated when circumstances change. A recently relaunched electronic pathway plan will allow for a more contemporaneous plan that can be reviewed as a dynamic document. This has started to add value to the development of the young person's pathway plan, ensuring that some plans remain relevant, but it is too soon to evaluate the impact more widely.

44. Care leavers understand the local offer, and this is clearly articulated to them by their PA. Care leavers are supported to access funding, including for setting up home, and some have been supported with driving lessons. Care leavers are actively encouraged to have a say in what is important, and many were involved in and helped to co-design the offer. This included that they should have access to data, travel cards and leisure passes.
45. The local authority is about to open an 'outpost' hub, which has been developed to enable care leavers to meet their peers or drop in for advice and support when needed. This is a new, positive development, but it is too early to be able to evaluate the full impact that it has had on care leavers' well-being.
46. Care leavers are supported to access education, employment and training by their PAs, who encourage and support the young person to address any barriers. The number of young people in education, employment and training has improved for 17- to 18-year-olds since the last inspection. However, there is more to do for those aged 19 to 21. The local authority is working alongside partners and stakeholders to address this.
47. Care leavers who are in custody are supported well by their workers. Regular visits to these care leavers, along with detailed and specific planning, for release or transfer, ensure that they have their health, education and safeguarding needs met while in custody and on release.
48. Young parents are supported, emotionally and practically, including through joint working with children's social care services, where there is a need for assessments and support to safely parent their children.
49. Most care leavers who are former UAS children are well supported by their personal advisers, who know them well and understand their needs. They are supported to access the local offer. Their cultural and religious needs are explored early and met effectively. Where possible, UAS care leavers are matched carefully and supported to live together, which promotes their language and cultural needs. Support is offered from specialist family finding services, such as The British Red Cross, to help young people separated from their families to retrace them, when they are ready and able to do so, and led at their pace. Access to education training is fully supported, as are community activities.

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

50. The leadership of the council and the corporate executive in the local authority recognise the needs of children and have prioritised these through the investment of resources, ambition and commitment. There is strong corporate and political support, with political oversight through scrutiny as a priority. They are well informed, offer challenge and have sustained good service delivery. Council leaders ensure that the children and families of Gateshead are at the heart of everything they do.
51. The development and strengthening of the voice of children and levels of consultation to shape services are evident in the corporate parenting board and beyond. The board ensures that children are involved in service design and identification of priorities that can make a difference to those for whom its delivery has the biggest impact. Utilising and developing the role of the care experienced young ambassadors and youth network enables leaders to gain the views of children to inform the corporate parenting board. The corporate parenting board is well attended by multi-agency partners, and young ambassadors also attend. Young ambassadors feel listened to and feel like they are the 'bridge' between children, young people and the local authority.
52. A stable and ambitious senior leadership team has overseen progress and development of good services for children in most areas. There has been clear momentum in the direction of travel to continue to build on strong and consistent practice. There is more to do on the response to homeless 16- and 17-year-olds and for young carers in receipt of social work intervention. Leaders are aware of this and have plans in place to improve outcomes for these children.
53. Senior leaders' self-evaluation of practice shows that they know themselves well. There are clear priorities in line with identified development needs and anticipated challenges. Realignment of services and portfolios has created an adolescent young person service, which includes the vulnerable adolescent team. Multi-agency working and specialist roles are seeking to address vulnerability and reduce risk among this cohort of young people. In response to need, realigned teams, experienced senior leader oversight and additional capacity have facilitated a kinship care team and pre-birth services model. There has been a strong response in improved outcomes for those children with whom these teams are involved.
54. Gateshead is a learning organisation that welcomes peer reviews and external evaluations. Scrutiny from external consultants, peers and in-house reviews are evidence of an openness to the review of practice and oversight of developments. Leaders are responsive to the findings and have strengthened some services as a result.

55. Senior leaders use performance management tools effectively to monitor service delivery. A robust and effective quality assurance programme is in place, with various quality assurance activities which provide insight into the quality of practice with children. Leaders are assured that practice is effecting positive change. Where there are identified areas requiring continued focus and development, such as consistency in use of reflection in supervision, quality of plans and the written record, plans are targeting the areas for improvement effectively. Appropriate work to strengthen the supervision framework is in place.
56. Senior leaders are visible and accessible, through active participation in quality assurance, chairing panels, boards and groups. IRO oversight and footprint have been strengthened and are extended to private fostering and kinship placements. Relationships with key partners are strong, mature and well developed, which results in effective information-sharing and cohesive working arrangements.
57. Strengthened sufficiency investment and commissioning arrangements ensure that more children are being cared for in and close to their home area. Gateshead is part of the Staying Close pilot and a programme of peer support to foster carers. Gateshead has had significant capital investment from the Department for Education to support the ambitious corporate parenting plan to open more homes for children in care locally. This should provide an increased number of secure and stable placements for children in their home communities.
58. The organisation has a determined focus on its workforce, recognising the significance of this asset, and areas of investment and development are strong. Investment in additional workforce capacity, including senior leadership posts, underlines a commitment to achieving priorities and improving outcomes for children. Not all additional workers are in post to enable increased capacity, and therefore it is too soon to be able to fully demonstrate and evaluate the impact of the increased workforce. Workers spoken to are proud to work in Gateshead and stay for significant periods.
59. Development routes, such as social work progression, ASYE academy and apprenticeship schemes, have facilitated a 'grow your own' approach. As a result of this, there are limited vacant posts, and these programmes and incentives are used to fill any presenting vacancies. Low turnover rates and low use of agency workers result in a cohesive, secure and focused culture that benefits children and families.
60. The well-embedded 'narrative approach' ensures that the language used by workers is accessible and understood by families. The approach draws on tools and models from strengths-based, person-centred practice. This was seen in the use of direct work to understand and use the child's voice and experiences in planning and decision-making. Further commitment and investment to utilise an external provider for a two-year work programme to further embed the

restorative and relational practice model across the whole system is planned to start in January 2025. There is a clear focus on creating the right environment, framework and culture for social work to thrive.

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